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Experiences of Suburban Students in a Social Justice Literacy Program

Jillian L. Scott

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the **Action Research Final Project** of

Jillian Scott

has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education degree.

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Committee:

Susan O'Connor
Adviser

Audrey Lensmire
Reader

ABSTRACT

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Jillian Scott

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Action Research (EDC 586-7) Final Project

The purpose of this qualitative study was to observe and gain insight into 110 ninth and tenth grade students' experiences who participated in a social justice literacy program. During the course of my research I used various forms of qualitative data collection including: focus groups, participant observations, journaling, and interviews, as well as collection of artifacts as a means to identify students' perceptions relating to social justice within the program. After analyzing the data a number of significant themes emerged including: students' openness to diversity, students' change in attitudes, the importance of continued teaching of social justice, and the need for social justice vocabulary acquisition. My findings on student experiences and perceptions of a social justice literacy program can be useful for creating professional development programs for educators. The recommendations for social justice related professional development are based on various correlated pedagogy and theory including: cultural competence and culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy. This research highlights the importance for the creation of, or the continued development of social justice literacy programs.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Molly is a popular, but quiet, tenth grade student at a suburban high school. Despite being well-liked one day in English class she is verbally attacked because of her religious beliefs. A tenth grade male classmate grew agitated and started to howl anti-Semitic slurs at Molly; he yelled things along the lines of "get out of here you Jew."

Jordan is a well-liked and outspoken eleventh grade class clown at the same high school. His favorite insult to hurl at his male classmates is "boy kisser."

Nate is an admired and outspoken tenth grade student. Nate created a new synonym for the term stupid. When Nate felt that something he was asked to do was "stupid" he would affirm, "That's so gay."

Evan is an extremely intelligent tenth grade student and instead of completing an assignment in the computer lab, he decided to look up a YouTube video entitled, "What Not to Say in a Room Full of Black People."

Statements and actions such as these are a part of everyday life at this suburban Minnesota high school, just as they are at many high schools across the country. Oftentimes hate speech leads to greater violence. For example, on February 11, 2011 an anti-gay column was printed in the Wichita East High Newspaper that implied that same sex relationships were not normal, and that same sex couples should be put to death (Johnson, 2011). In Oxnard, California an eighth grade boy was shot to death by a fellow student for his sexual orientation. And in Jena, Louisiana there was growing racial tension after a black student sat under a tree in the schoolyard where only white students sat. The next day three nooses were hanging from the tree. These statements and actions are not only prevalent in high schools, but also exist in higher education. During a course in a teacher education program entitled, "Identity and Teaching," a white student

stated, "Why do we spend so much time on this race stuff; these people just need to get over it" (as cited in NEA Today, Fall, 2011, p. 55). If teachers hold these beliefs there is little hope for their students; statements and actions of hate will continue in our society.

Guiding Question

The essential question that prompted my research investigation was: How can I encourage students' tolerance, compassion, and respect for the "other," people who are different from themselves, through the teaching of English (reading, writing, speaking, and listening)? As I conducted my research I sought to observe students' experiences and perceptions of a social justice literacy program. A social justice literacy program is based on the principles of equality and values all human rights. The basic premise of social justice is to observe and analyze the way in which human rights are manifested in the everyday lives of people at every level of society. Social justice seeks to right wrongs that are being done, or have been done historically; it also attempts to liberate the oppressed and reform society. During my study I created my own social justice literacy curriculum using the following units and texts: mythology, the memoir *Of Beetles and Angels*, the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My social justice literacy curriculum was aligned to the Minnesota High School Language Arts Standards.

Purpose of the Study

Based on my experiences as an English teacher I have been influenced to research the experiences of suburban students in a social justice literacy program because of the different beliefs and prejudices I have observed in my students. In my estimate, many students lacked compassion and understanding of the "other." Because all people hold prejudices, at the very least, I hoped to observe students become more aware of their prejudice and become more

empathetic of the "other," those who they saw as different from themselves. Additionally, I hoped that students would, "step into another's shoes or climb into another's skin" as the famous moral compass, Atticus Finch, stated in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, (Lee, 1988, p. 56) if a social justice curriculum would be part of their English literacy curriculum.

I was influenced to research teaching tolerance and social justice through literature by the overwhelming prejudice and bigotry I saw in the classroom. Many students were not tolerant of the "other," whatever that "other" may have been (gender, sexual orientation, and race, anything "different").

Educators have a responsibility to act as role models for students, to encourage them to make a difference in the world, and to instill in them a desire to foster change. It is a teacher's job to encourage students to be unbiased and tolerant of the world around them; to inspire them to accept people despite their differences, and to praise and support those students when they embrace those differences. It is a communication arts and literature teacher's responsibly to teach children the importance of tolerance and social justice through literature and writing, hence a social justice literacy program.

Because meanings of texts change from reader to reader, and there is no single correct interpretation of any given text, it was important in my social justice program for students to appreciate the power of multiple perspectives. Students needed to learn how to read and analyze literature through different critical lenses; this evaluation of literature would not only hopefully improve their critical thinking skills, but also optimistically make them more tolerate of other people's perspectives and points of view.

Teaching tolerance through literature and writing fits the larger context of schooling and society. Everything a teacher does will help prepare their students for the work their lives will

ask of them. Educators have a responsibility, and have made a commitment to society, to help produce functioning, tolerant, and contributing members of society and to craft childrens' awareness of the world around them; literature and writing are wonderful ways to make that happen. I found that a very effective way to encourage students' tolerance and compassion for the "other" was by teaching through the literature.

Students were often intolerant because of fear and their lack of exposure to the "other," people who were different from themselves. Literature was fantastic in the sense that it gave students experiences that they normally would not encounter. Because literature opened the door for students and gave them exposure to the "other" that they may otherwise not have been exposed to, a social justice literacy program promoted tolerance in the classroom. Hopefully that tolerance would spill over into every aspect of those students' lives. This qualitative study explored students' perceptions of a social justice literacy program through the collection, analysis, and use of student artifacts, interviews, and focus groups.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

This literature review includes a summary and critical analysis of sixteen qualitative and quantitative research studies published between 1994-2011 that focus on social justice and educational pedagogy and theory, numerous websites and web videos, books, and periodical articles. This literature review will focus on: the achievement gap in education, traditional English curriculum, multicultural education, and social justice curriculum. The basic premise of social justice is to examine the way in which human rights are manifested in the everyday lives of people at every level of society. Overall, the studies and literature emphasize the importance of educators across content areas being knowledgeable about social justice and democratic discourse and theory, as well as implementing and becoming instruments for social justice and culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. According to the literature, the exploration and implementation of social justice is vital for both students of "privilege" (economic, educational, and emotional security) and for student populations determined to have less privilege, thus resulting in the achievement gaps. According to statistics from the Nation's Report Card and the National Assessment of Educational Progress on Reading there is still a large achievement gap based on ethnicity and gender. Black and Hispanic students have made progress towards narrowing the achievement gap that separates them from their white classmates; however, that progress seems to have come to a stand still since the mid-1980s. Christine Sleeter, a professor in the College of Professional Studies at California State University, Monterey Bay, states that, "low expectations, tracking, and the disproportionate number of white students in gifted and talented programs" (Race is related to learning opportunities)

are examples of how race is tied to learning opportunities that affect the achievement gap. For the most part literacy disadvantages and achievement gaps are an issue of equality and social justice. So how do educators start to close this achievement gap?

Traditional English Curriculum

A traditional English curriculum is a back to basics approach of skill and drill activities, lecture, and rote memorization and may be part of the problem when it comes to the achievement gap. Many traditional English curriculums are text centered, meaning that teachers teach the literature pure and simple with a focus on grammar, semantics, and deep analysis of text structure and figures of speech. Within a traditional English class teachers teach the piece of literature within itself, without the lens of diversity and social justice. According to Kanpol (1999),

> Under the schooling rubric, traditional literacy holds schools morally accountable to provide a technical mastery of skills for students; to be functional in the basics of reading, math, and writing. More than that, "schooling" or traditional literacy also means teaching the above functions on multiple levels (say, 4th, 6th, 9th, or 12th grades), but with little creativity, no sense of purpose other than to go on to the next grade, and little moral vision or insight as to a larger picture revolving around "education" (Critical Pedagogy For Beginning Teachers: the Movement From Despair to Hope).

When teachers simply pump their personal thoughts, feelings, and analysis into the minds of their students with no emphasis on independent thought or analysis problems arise; this is what Paublo Fraire refers to as the, "banking model of education" (Friere, 1970, p. 58). Oftentimes traditional English pedagogy encompasses everything Freire despises. For example, the

traditional English classroom positions students as "empty vessels to be filled by the teacher." Freire (1970) believes that education is traditionally framed as, "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 58). In this type of traditional environment, the teacher lectures, and the students "receive, memorize, and repeat" (p. 58). Freire explains that banking education is defined by the characteristics of the following attitudes and pedagogy:

- the teacher teaches and the students are taught;

- the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;

- the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;

- the teacher talks and the students listen--meekly;

- the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;

- the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;

- the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;

- the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who are not consulted) adapt to it;

- the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;

- the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects (p. 59).

Problems often arise in a traditional English curriculum because teachers who teach the text believe that there is a right and a wrong and these classrooms in turn do not foster an open and discussion based environment. Nehring (2011) believes that the features of schools that

share the tradition of what they consider "progressive" education are in reality steeped in the rich tradition of what many would consider a traditional educational approach including: "a curriculum driven by questions, respect for the mind and imagination of the student, a focus on intellectual skills and habits, and the driving conviction that students are not merely empty vessels into which knowledge is poured" (Education Week, 2011). However, many traditional English classrooms operate within the framework that Freire deems as the "banking model of education."

Options for Alternative Pedagogy Including Social Justice and Multicultural Education

Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is defined and categorized by Gorski (2010) as a:

> Progressive approach for transforming education that holistically critiques and responds to discriminatory policies and practices in education. It is grounded in ideals of social justice, education equity, critical pedagogy, and a dedication to providing educational experiences in which all students reach their full potentials as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally. Multicultural education acknowledges that schools are essential to laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of injustice (Critical Multicultural Pavilion Working Definition 2010).

According to Okoye-Johnson (2011, p. 1253), proponents of multicultural education state that the inclusion of multicultural education in the curriculum creates an atmosphere where racial attitudes and academic achievement are improved. In an educational world of state and national

tests and standards, closing the achievement gap is a reality facing all educators. Well planned and executed multicultural education embedded into the curriculum will help transform students' thought processes and in turn help them critically analyze the world around them. This critical thinking will affect social change in a positive way and create a more tolerant society as a whole. This tolerance will in turn help close the achievement gap in America. Basically, the fundamental purpose of multicultural education is to somehow affect social change and transformation, the premise of a multicultural curriculum encompasses social justice pedagogy-- seeing as though it is by definition grounded in ideals of social justice.

Critical Pedagogy Theory

One option for an alternative curriculum/pedagogy would be to embrace the critical pedagogy theory. The founders of critical pedagogy, Henry Girous and Peter McLaren, as well as Paulo Friere believe that in order to achieve equality and freedom in the educational system educators and policy makers must first recognize that the system currently in place is a system of oppressive relations. Popkewitz & Fendler (1999) state that, "The task of critical pedagogy is to bring members of an oppressed group to critical consciousness of their situation as a beginning point of their libratory praxis" (p. 56). Meaning that essentially the educational system must develop a critical consciousness, as defined by Friere as the ability to perceive social, political, and economic oppression and to take action against the oppressive elements of society. Additionally, the ability to critique the social relations, social institutions, and social traditions that create and maintain conditions of oppression within the educational system is also vital. Popkewitz & Fendler (1999) state that the primary focus of critical pedagogy is with social injustice and how to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations. While other scholars, like Barry Kanpol, define critical pedagogy as the means and

methods of testing and attempting to change the structures of schools that allow inequities. According to Kanpol (1999), this theory is:

> A cultural-political tool that takes the notion of human difference seriously, particularly those related to race, class, and gender. Critical pedagogy seeks to release the oppressed and unite people in a shared language of critique, struggle, and hope, to end various forms of human suffering (p. 27).

Within the current contemporary educational system there are many excluded voices; critical pedagogy should be welcomed with open arms. It encourages and searches for new voices that may have been traditionally excluded by the dominate privileged culture. Voices from the economically disadvantaged, non-English as a first language speakers, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, non-whites, and those with disabilities. This alternative framework for an English classroom would encourage individual voices and perspectives that have previously been excluded within a traditional banking model of education English classroom.

Culturally Relevant/Responsive Pedagogy

A second option for an alternative framework within the English classroom would be a culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy. Culture encompasses world views, beliefs, language and values. Irvine (2001) states that the goal of culturally relevant/responsive teaching is to bring the cultural life of different groups into the view of teaching and learning. Teachers in a culturally relevant/responsive classroom's goal and responsibly is to make cultural connections for students because students do not approach learning, as Irvine, refers to as, "cultural blank slates"; therefore, teachers are the "cultural translators and bridge builders" (Irvine, 2001). Teachers are making connections and links for students. This concept is not a course, but rather it is a methodological notion or theory/framework of how to go about teaching and learning.

Geneva Gay defines culturally relevant teaching as, "using history, heritage, legacy, experiences, and points of reference of different ethnic groups as conduits or filters to assist in the teaching/learning process" (Goals of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy n.d.). According to Gay (2000), culturally responsive teaching is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory and involves using the "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 29). Interestingly, Gay has found that (as cited in Atwater, pg. 162), "Many of [my] European American students claim that they are open to ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. However, in their discourse, they talk about the need to develop awareness--more awareness is needed to be proficient in classroom teaching." This is the exact opposite of a traditional banking model of education within an English classroom.
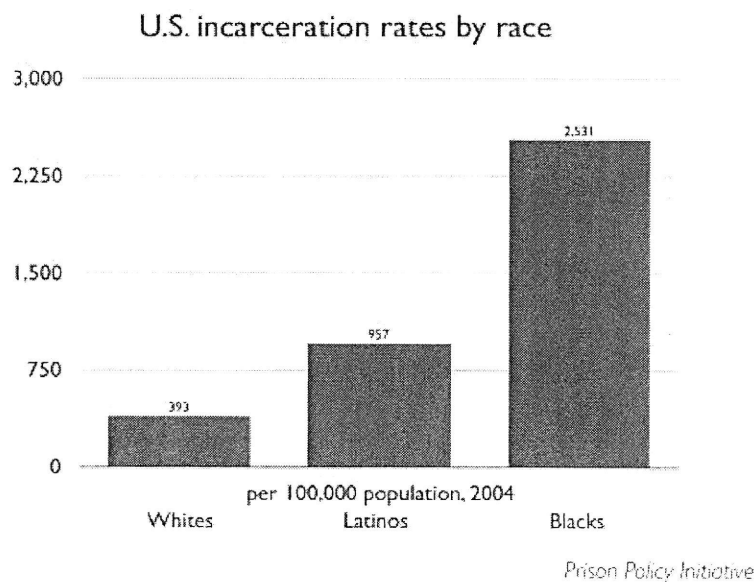
There is inappropriateness between cultural filters that have been used traditionally to send instructional messages. Students coming from different minority, ethnic and racial backgrounds are trying to learn and receive what traditional schools are teaching them through another set of cultural "filters." When these filters do not match no learning occurs (Gay). "Rather than always insisting that students adapt to the culture of the school, the school needs to adapt and modify some of its sending messages/mechanisms [to be] more in line with the receptacle lenses of students" (Goals of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy n.d). Again, just like with the critical pedagogy theory step one is for educational system educators and policy makers to first recognize that the system currently in place is a system of oppressive associations. Once the traditional pedagogy is recognized as hindering our ever growing diverse student body the critical pedagogy and culturally relevant theory/pedagogy can be embedded within the

classrooms to ensure success for all students regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or economic status and as a result the achievement gap can start to shrink and hopefully eventually disappear.

Similarities Instead of Differences and Identity – The Why and How of a Social Justice Classroom

Why should educators plan curriculum with a social justice philosophy as a center? Because literacy is not only an education issue; it is also a social issue. Nationally, about one in three prison inmates performed at Level 1 on the 1990 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) prose scale. Additionally, the likelihood of being on welfare goes up as literacy levels go down (Prison Policy Initiative). Alliterate or illiterate citizens often do not contribute in a community or toward society in a meaningful way. There is a correlation between the achievement gap of Hispanic and black students and the U.S. incarceration rates for these groups. United States incarceration rates among Latino and Blacks are much higher than Whites.

U.S. incarceration rates by race

per 100,000 population, 2004

Prison Policy Initiative

June 30, 2004 U.S. Census (Graph: Peter Wagner, 2005)

Also, three out of four food stamp recipients performed in the two lowest literacy levels on the 1990 National Adult Literacy Survey prose scale. Therefore, educators need to ensure that every student, regardless or color, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status is provided the opportunity to learn.

According to Grant (1977), Gay (1988), Sleeter and Grant (2006), C. I. Bennett (1990), Nieto (1992), Banks (1994), Coelho (1994) and Davidman and Davidman (1994) as cited in Okoye-Johnson (2011):

> The inclusion of multicultural education in the curriculum of schools creates an atmosphere where racial attitudes and academic achievement are improved. Students are more apt to concentrate on their studies rather than on racially or ethnically based fights and incidents that create the disruption of the learning environment, divert time and resources from critical academic activities, and lead to the possible suspension or expulsion of such students from the schools, triggering an increase in the dropout rate of those students involved.

It is never too early to teach students to be democratic citizens. Ciardiello (2010) argues that, "children need training in these democratic acts as part of literacy development. Literacy can play a role as a resource for cultivating civic responsibility and social justice in childhood education" (p. 464). Hohn (1997) found that low literacy, poor health, and early death are inexorably linked. There is a distinct relationship between literacy and opportunity.

One historical struggle of educators hindering this leap into a social justice pedagogy and connection within the classroom is fear on the part of the educators. One of the main issues contributing to only viewing differences instead of similarities is the fear of having hard

conversations in classrooms regarding social justice issues, particularly issues regarding race. Pollock (n.d.) states that:

> If no discussion is taking place, misconceptions or un-education about differences cannot be changed. Often teachers worry that having discussions of issues of race with students will raise problems that they do not want to deal with. However, the only way to move past the issues of race and misconception is to discuss and come to common understandings" (How the Concept of Race Evolved Over Time n.d.).

Additionally, Pollock (2004) believes that:

> Such everyday dilemmas of race talk…are not "just talk"—both our talk and our silence about race have real ramifications for what we do and do not do about racial inequality. I have found that when researchers and practitioners talk and think clumsily about race in education—and relatedly, when we refuse anxiously to talk and think about race at all— we risk harming the very students many of us set out to assist.

An interesting term coined by Pollock is the concept of "Color Muteness." This references situations where people are thinking about race issues and seeing people in racial terms, but just never talking about it. (Pollock) believes that:

> Often what teachers aren't doing is talking about real issues that they and their students are struggling with. Whether it is relationships across race lines, whether it's peoples very different experiences along racial lines, whether it's stereotypes in the world that are really affecting how young people feel about themselves or how teachers feel about young people (How the Concept of Race Evolved Over Time n.d.).

The bottom line regarding racial inequality in the classroom according to Pollock is that "we can't fix a machine without talking about where it is broken, so if we never talk about issues of

racial inequality for example, we can't address them together as a nation" (How the Concept of

Race Evolved Over Time n.d.).

Humans make sense of the world through how they see themselves and how they see or

perceive the "other." Identifying with a group is extremely important, but simultaneously can be

very damaging within the educational system if educational pedagogy does not foster the concept

of similarities instead of differences. Furthermore, everyone possesses a racial identity and that

racial identity affects the way we interact with the world. As stated earlier, the black and

Hispanic achievement gap is a huge issue within the educational system and is spilling into other

areas of society. According to NCES, (1999), only 18% of African-American and 19% of

Hispanic high school graduates in their late 20's have earned a bachelor's degree, compared to

35% of whites. These black and Hispanic student's racial identities have historically been

viewed as different from white, and that difference has helped contribute to the large

achievement gap for many of these students. Okoye-Johnson (2011) finds:

> Multicultural education to be effective in improving racial attitudes of students in
>
> prekindergarten through 12th grade from the results of this meta-analysis.
>
> Policy makers and practitioners, therefore, should scrutinize the content of
>
> schools' curricula to ensure that multicultural education is an integral part of the
>
> curricula. This is essential since the curricular intervention dimension of ME was found
>
> to be much more effective than the reinforcement dimension in reducing prejudicial
>
> attitudes. Funds would be usefully allocated to revise or rewrite the
>
> curriculum of schools as well as to provide training and support for teachers
>
> who are responsible for implementing the multicultural curriculum.

Creating a student centered social justice or multicultural curriculum based classroom takes time. Teachers have a hard time making the leap because so much of the concept of social justice is steeped in theory. According to Schoorman and Bogotch (2010), "Teachers relate to strategies not theory" (p. 81). Therefore, in order to implement a social justice program, multicultural education has to provide educators with strategies for instruction. Social justice education has to be part of the daily curriculum and objectives in order to be successful. School administrators need to create new policies and procedures that lead to thriving outcomes for all students and that support inclusive practices. The good news is that young students have an innate curiosity and interest in fairness and social justice issues; they are naturally sensitive to social conditions as well. Consequently, there is often not push back from students involved in social justice programs because they are so open and sensitive to social justice issues and a student centered classroom.

Every person who is part of a child's life has the unique opportunity to provide hope for students if they serve as agents of equality and fairness. It is vital for the success of all that educators "be ready to address the diverse needs children bring with them to the school setting" (Beswick, Sloat, Williams, 2008, p. 117).

Social justice education and pedagogy is based on the premise of equality and human rights. Many countries around the world focus on multicultural education and try to respond to the needs of diverse student populations. While multicultural education and curriculum is extremely important to closing the achievement gap as supported in an Okoye-Johnson study on multicultural education and closing the achievement gap, Schoorman and Bogatch (2010) caution that, "While the focus on marginalized populations has noble roots and crucial philosophical underpinnings, it also runs the risk of engaging in 'other-ing' particular groups and

drawing attention to difference rather than the underlying process for such differentiation" (p. 79). This 'other-ing' can create a culture within the school system that promotes viewing differences first instead of similarities. One of the main goals of multicultural education is to see the similarities and not the differences in "the other."

Teacher Centered Classrooms vs. Student Centered Classrooms / Students Becoming Social Justice Educators

Multicultural and social justice programs are positive and utterly important (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). It is imperative that we shift from a teacher-centered program to a student centered approach. Kanpol (1999) makes an important distinction between schooling and education. Schooling is very similar to the teacher-centered program while education is similar to the student-centered approach. Schooling and education are two very different things.

Schooling is what many traditional classrooms look like. The traditional structure of schools, according to Kanpol (1999), is a "socially efficient system of management and control… (rigid rule structure, standardized curriculum, etc.)" Teacher-centered classrooms are typical of traditional instruction. Teachers spend time lecturing while student's take notes, listen, and regurgitate the information. According to Kanpol (1999), there are many characteristics of schooling:

> Strict accountability models for teachers, demeaning stereotyping, sterile teaching methodologies, rote learning, forgetting information the next day or simply after a test, and the like, place the student and teacher in the awful predicament of using schooling as a socialization mechanism that loses sight of the many reasons for attending schools in the first place - nurture, care, community, citizenship preparation - in short, a broad

education (Critical Pedagogy For Beginning Teachers: the Movement From Despair To Hope).

Whereas student-centered classrooms are typical of the culturally responsive classroom or a classroom based on critical pedagogy, Kanpol (1999) refers to this type of classroom as "education."

Education presupposes intrinsic motivation…the ability to get students to think critically, being creative about subject matter content, creating a classroom of an active community revolved around the learning of material, and the strong desire to teach and to learn. Above all else, education involves the teacher understanding the schooling structure that wouldn't allow education to ensue (Critical Pedagogy for Beginning Teachers: the Movement from Despair to Hope).

Kanpol's idea of education meshes well with this the theory of critical pedagogy. Popkewitz and Fendler (1999) describe critical pedagogy as an effort to:

Work within the educational institutions and other media to raise questions about inequalities of power, about the false myths of opportunity and merit for many students, and about the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life (p. 50).

Therefore, a student-centered classroom would help facilitate intrinsic motivation and also help establish a social justice classroom.

Kanpol questions:

> What kind of education can I give my students that can create a space for them so as they
> can be critical citizens, so I can generate democracy in my classrooms, so I can open up
> options for them, given the pervasiveness and need for schooling to survive in this
> country? (Critical Pedagogy for Beginning Teachers: the Movement from Despair to
> Hope).

The answer is a student-centered classroom based on ideals of social justice. Students need to understand and recognize that not everyone thinks the same way and that individual discourse plays a large role in perception and point of view. Students have to be able to recognize racism and the impact of white privilege (especially in the United States) and need to embrace, the "oneness of human kind" (Davis, 2010, 44).

Privileged Perceptions

We as educators are already "privileged" in the fact that we are well educated. Educators are afforded the luxury of schooling and that knowledge, in turn, gives us power. A key question related to social justice education is, "how do we develop educators who understand and listen to the voices of the oppressed when they themselves are the oppressed – and/or the oppressor – in one of more of their structural social identities?" (Quin, 2009, p. 110). According to Kleinman and Copp (2009), there are four folk beliefs that are most pronounced among students of privilege with privilege being defined as white, heterosexual, male, and middle to upper-middle class. These folk beliefs about social justice include: damage is direct and is formed by an individual and their intentions, harm is the creation of the psyche, in order to be harm there must be blame, beliefs and practices that students enjoy cannot be destructive and refers to,

"conventional understandings that people use to make sense of the world and to act toward it" (Kleinman & Copp, 2009, p. 283).

These folk beliefs hurt students in grades K-12, but play an increasingly more important role in the destruction of the early year's education. Bestwick, Sloat and Willms, (2008), argue that:

> Children from supportive backgrounds and print-rich environments enter school with a 1,000 hour lead over children who do not; they come to school with more skills and have a more successful transition from home to school. Disadvantaged students, students who lack the background knowledge and have weak literacy backgrounds, have a more difficult home to school transition and have fewer skills. The majority of these children are disadvantaged socioeconomically, or are minority students.

Regardless of the advantages, it is a myth that people who are disadvantaged cannot catch up to their advantaged peers. Research shows that with the right teachers, caregivers, and communities these children can succeed. Long story short, these children's fates are not sealed (Beswick, Sloat & Willms, 2008).

Summary

To provide effective multicultural education, social justice has to be part of a school-wide atmosphere, culture, and philosophy. Schoorman and Bogotch (2010) state that "efforts must be made to present social justice as an integral part of the 'ordinary' efforts for 'everyday' educators" (p. 83). In many schools this means that there has to be a shift in culture and community towards inclusiveness and equitability. Ungerleider argues that... (As cited in Beswick et al, 2008, p. 125) "Schools have the dual responsibility of transmitting cultural knowledge and values while simultaneously preparing the next generation of citizens."

It is important for educators to keep in mind that oneness is not sameness. This concept is vital in creating a culture and atmosphere of success, inclusion, and equality. "The emphasis is on literacy and its link to the construction of knowledge in classrooms to reflect and challenge larger social, historical, and cultural issues" (Jocson, 2009 p. 270).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

This study was based on the perceptions of secondary students in a social justice literacy program. The primary goal of the research was to gain insight into students' perceptions who participated in a social justice literacy program at Pine High School.

Methodological Framework: Action Research

This study used action research, which is "any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school consolers, or other stakeholders in the teaching / learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn" (Mills, 2000, p. 5). All data collected in this study was qualitative in nature; qualitative research uses participant observations, journaling, interviews, focus groups, and collection of artifacts as a means of data collection. Data for this study was collected using: classroom activities, student created artifacts, field notes, and small focus group and personal interview transcripts.

Setting and Participants

This study took place at PHS; a big suburban high school located in a large metro area in Minnesota with a current enrollment of just under 2,000 students. At the time there were many programs available at PHS for students including: International Baccalaureate (IB), Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID), school within a school (SWAS), and advanced placement programs. My goal in this study was to observe students, in both the mainstream classroom, as well as, the pre-IB (International Baccalaureate) classroom, and gain a better understanding of their perceptions and reactions to social justice situations and literacy

programs. This study did not focus on the entire student population, but rather small segments of 9th and 10th grade students. A total of 110 students were involved in this study; observations and student artifacts were gathered from all 110 students. Participants were chosen because they were enrolled in either my mainstream English 10 class or my pre-IB 9th grade English class. Participants in the study were between the ages of 14 and 16. There were 60 male participants and 50 female participants. The following is a breakdown of the students' race/ethnicity demographics:

Caucasian = 92

Black = 5

Hmong = 2

Hispanic = 6

Asian = 4

East Indian = 1

Furthermore, below are short descriptions of each of the seven focus group and interview participants.

Jackie

Jackie was a white 9th grade student at PHS and she freely expressed her opinions on issues and was vocal on a daily basis. Additionally, she participated frequently during in-class discussions and activities. Jackie came from what might be considered a conservative upbringing and a strict home life. In one journal entry Jackie wrote, "My father does not understand me and how my life is very different from his. He had me when he was 62-years-old, so he is older than my friends' parents, and he is really strict about everything."

Katie

Katie was a white 9th grade student at PHS. She was highly intelligent and was flagged as gifted and talented. At the time of the research she was reading years above her grade level, and had exceeded expectations on every state test. Katie's family valued education; her dad was a teacher. In addition to her exceeding academically she was very socially mature. Compared to her peers, Katie was very insightful. For example, Katie wrote in a journal on the prompt, 'Do you feel as though hate is bred?', "It is often found that generations of a family will have similar beliefs and morals. Does that also mean that hate is passed down? I believe that someone can be raised to hate a person or a group of people, but that doesn't give him or her an excuse to hate them. People can control their own actions and morals."

David

David was a student who participated in the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program at PHS. He was an African American 9th grader with little motivation academically and had little support at home. During his 9th grade year David failed six classes and had to complete credit recovery. He agreed to be part of the focus group and interviews because of the subject matter. While David was capable of much more academically, he often chose to not complete work. Often during class David would listen and participate even if he did not complete the reading or content for the day.

Zoe

Zoe was a smart and capable student, testing above grade level on most state tests, but she was often unmotivated in school. She completed small amounts of homework if she was interested in the content and had little parental support at home. Despite the lack of support Zoe chose to take honors classes. Zoe was a Hispanic 9th grade student at PHS.

Sam

Sam was a white 9th grader at PHS. Sam was motivated to be successful in his schooling. Sam's strength in English was his writing ability and creativeness. He was always willing to participate and share his opinions and thoughts during class.

Amy

Amy was a 9th grade Hmong student at PHS and participated in the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program. While she lacked support at home she was provided with ample academic support at school and exceeded academically in her classes. Amy was active in theatre at PHS.

Nate

Nate worked hard, asked questions, participated, was creative, and was compassionate to others feelings. For example, Nate wrote in a journal on the prompt, 'Do you feel as though hate is bred?', "I believe that hatred is something that is learned rather than bred, or simply handed down through generations. And while I think that parents definitely have an effect on who people are, they don't define who you are." Nate was active in the theatre program at PHS and was a 9th grade white male.

Structure of my Social Justice Literacy Program - Setting

I took the state and district standards and curriculum for both 9th and 10th grade English and incorporated and embedded social justice activities into the everyday lessons in my classroom. Over the course of my research the following pieces of literature were required for students to read by my school district:

- *The Odyssey* and other classic Greek and Roman Mythology as well as additional cultural mythology

- *To Kill a Mockingbird*

- *Of Beetles and Angels*

- *A Raisin in the Sun*

While teaching this literature I embedded many activities, assignments, projects, and journal prompts into the curriculum. All of these activities related to issues of social justice, democracy, multiculturalism, tolerance, and point of view or perspective and helped me better understand students' perspectives in a social justice literacy program. I created the social justice literacy curriculum based on the Minnesota High School Language Arts Standards. One limitation in the setting was students' ability to participate in the focus groups and interviews. I was not allowed to conduct my focus groups during the school day, so I had to meet with the focus groups before or after school. Many of my participants took the bus to school and were unable to be at school before and after due to transportation limitations. Therefore, they were unable to participate in the focus group. However, I was able to hold two focus groups each with seven participants.

Data Collection

I informed both students and parents/legal guardians of all 110 students in my English classes via a letter about the nature of the study. I was only required to inform students and

parents of the study and I was not required to obtain consent/assent by the school district for any

data/observations that would normally take place within the realm of the typical school day, or

during the normal curriculum. Because I was basing my social justice literacy curriculum on the

critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching I did not have to obtain consent/assent from

all 110 students. Observations and student artifacts were gathered from all 110 students;

however, I did have to obtain consent/assent from the seven students and their parents who

agreed to participate in the focus groups and individual interviews outside of the typical literacy

curriculum. I informed the volunteers that their parents or legal guardians were required to also

give permission in order for the students to participate. When all seven students and legal

guardians signed and returned the consent/assent forms each student was given a pseudonym to

ensure his or her anonymity, those students were the seven described in detail above.

After shaping my focus question, obtaining permission from the Institutional Review

Board (IRB) at Augsburg College to advance with my research process, and once consent and

assent was obtained, along with school and district approval, I began to collect data from my

participants. I collected data both from my classroom participants, as well as from the seven

students in my focus group. Data for this research project was collected using qualitative

methods. Data collection was done in several ways. First, I collected data through the use of a

focus group of seven students. The focus group met twice throughout my data collection for

about 20 minutes. I audio recorded the focus group meetings and then conducting follow up

interviews, also audio taped, with participants to clarify and explore issues raised during focus

group discussions. Individual interviews lasted anywhere from five to ten minutes. From the

focus groups and interviews I gained insight into overlying themes that began to emerge. I also

collected data in the forms of observation field notes, journals, and artifacts from both my focus

group participants, as well as my 110 classroom participants. Artifacts collected included student writing and journaling, poetry, and positive/negative graph PowerPoint presentations, related to student perceptions within the social justice literacy program. Additionally, I transcribed focus group interviews that were previously audio recorded looking for emerging themes. I also wrote many field notes throughout the course of my study and data collection both during the small seven person focus groups and interviews and also during many mainstream classroom discussions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on grounded theory, meaning, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967), that themes emerged from data methodically obtained from social research. Once my data was collected including student artifacts, field notes, journals, interviews, and focus group meetings I stared to interpret the data. I listened to the focus groups and individual interviews and transcribed the data. I looked over my field notes and began to add additional observer comments. Furthermore, I began to look over all of the artifacts (student work) I had collected. From there I began coding data and themes began to emerge. Through the process of coding, "the process of trying to find patterns and meaning in data collected through the use of surveys, interviews, and questionnaires" (Mills, 2011, p. 129) several themes began to emerge including: students' openness to diversity, students' change in attitudes, the importance of continued teaching of social justice, and the need for social justice vocabulary acquisition.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter I will discuss the findings of this qualitative research, which emerged through grounded theory. Throughout the process of conducting focus groups, interviews and analyzing artifacts from both 9th and 10th grade students a number of significant themes began to emerge. The findings were categorized into four major themes. These themes were: students' openness to diversity, students' change in attitudes, the importance of continued teaching of social justice, and the need for social justice vocabulary acquisition.

"I have found that I have international mindedness, empathy for those who are different, while retaining pride in my own identify"- Students' Openness to Diversity

The first major theme that emerged from the data was the overwhelming openness to diversity that many students showed, spoke, and wrote about throughout the course of this research. Often the structure of the social justice literacy program was formatted similarly, meaning that students would participate in pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading activities during each unit in this social justice literacy program. When I introduced new units, for example, students were often asked to participate in some sort of pre-reading activity to activate prior knowledge and vocabulary about the novel, topic, or theme that they would be reading and studying. Oftentimes this pre-reading activity asked students to predict possible themes, setting, and/or elements of characterization of whatever unit of study we were starting through viewing of images and text. For example, the gallery walk was often used as a pre-reading activity. The gallery walk was a student-centered activity meant to activate prior knowledge about a topic through images and text. When my 10th grade classes began a drama

unit and were preparing to read and study the play, *A Raisin in the Sun,* students were asked to participate in a gallery walk in preparation for the play (see appendix 2).

After viewing and reflecting on the images and text provided, which included images related to historical inequality (civil rights), freedom (the American flag), and images representing the Harlem Renaissance and opportunity for minorities, as well as the poem, "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes, students came up with the following possible themes related to the play--most of which showed that students displayed openness to diversity:

1. People who start with nothing can achieve a lot.

2. Everyone, regardless of race or religion, has struggles.

3. Freedom and equality don't always come easy.

4. Segregation is a problem.

5. Don't judge a book by its cover.

6. If you are determined you can achieve almost anything regardless of race.

7. It doesn't matter where you come from.

8. Rights and equality can be achieved.

9. Treat others how you would want to be treated.

10. Racial tensions are bad.

11. Fight for freedom.

12. Open your eyes to the word outside your bubble.

13. Segregation is not okay.

Another pre-reading activity often used in this social justice literacy program was an anticipation guide, a guide that prepared students to identify the major themes and concepts of a written work through a series of statements that addressed the concepts and/or themes. Students

were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements in order to encourage them to think about certain ideas/themes and activate prior knowledge about the text. Before even reading or discussing certain social justice related topics, themes, or texts the vast majority of students demonstrated a great openness to diversity and social justice related issues during these pre-reading activities. Seventy-eight of my 10th grade students completed an anticipation guide and reflected on issues and themes prior to reading the memoir *Of Beetles and Angels* by Mawi Asegdom (see appendix 1). One of the statements on the anticipation guide that students were asked to agree or disagree with was, "social injustices exist today," and an immense majority of students agreed with this statement, just as the vast majority agreed that, "racial injustice exists in other parts of the world."

Additionally, throughout the process of holding focus groups and during the process of interviewing students, this theme of openness to diversity became extremely apparent during a discussion with my 9th grade focus group of seven students about creation myths and international mindedness. International mindedness is defined as, a growing inclination toward:

- An understanding and celebration of the value of diversity, in all its forms.

- Empathy for those who are different, while retaining pride in one's own identity.

- Open-minded inquiry accompanied by critical thinking about what is discovered via that inquiry.

- An understanding that individuals can improve the state of the world, and an accompanying acceptance of the responsibility to take action to do so.

After students read three different creation myths from around the world that are a required piece of 9th grade curriculum: one from Greece, one from Uganda, and one from China, they were

asked to complete a comparison and contrast written response about the cultural myths (see appendix 6).

      After the assignment was completed I held a focus group to discuss and gain student perceptions on the topic. Many students in the focus group voiced opinions that showed their openness to diversity, even if the beliefs of others clashed with their own personal religion or culture. For example, Jackie stated:

> I am highly opinionated. I have gotten into arguments because people didn't believe in what I believe. But since I've started learning about other cultures and societies I've been accepting new ideas. I still have strong beliefs in my own culture, but now I know about other myths. I'm really starting to form new opinions. My idea is that once we stop being so judgmental towards people who don't believe in what we believe we can start to have peace. But until that day comes we will all turn our backs on each other. We need to see problems from other's points of view, which is the only way.

Additionally, Katie demonstrated leadership with her response to reading different cultural myths. Katie said she:

> Could not immediately dismiss other culture's beliefs out of my mind just because I believe something different. That would be an act of utter disrespect. All of their beliefs and my own hold some stance in love and kindness. The creatures in the creation myths have to work together in some way for the world to continue as it should. That is a lesson that I think everyone should learn.

Both Jackie and Katie held strong personal religious beliefs, but expressed that perspective and seeing things from different points of view were powerful factors in obtaining a peaceful and accepting society.

Similarly, David stated:

> While reading the creation myths I came to realize an understanding of the values of
> diversity in all its forms. All the creation myths were very similar and the same idea, but
> they had their twists based on their culture. They all celebrated the culture and expressed
> their stories/traditions.

Zoe agreed and expressed thoughts related to her own life and beliefs:

> These myths made me think about how similar all these "myths" are. I noticed several
> similarities between these stories and my own religion. They made me realize that my
> religion is nothing more than a myth, another version of these stories. It may, in my
> opinion, be the most accurate account of what really happened, but they are mostly the
> same stories.

From Zoe's response, it was apparent that she was starting to see similarities instead of
differences and was starting to understand and embrace the concept of international mindedness.
In response Sam shared that he:

> Learned that a lot of cultures believe in a big idea, but disagree on the little details. For
> example, all three myths had one sole creation but they disagree on how many other gods
> got there. International mindedness is the understanding of the world around us. This is
> a good trait to have. It teaches you about the world around us. Diversity is good; it gives
> you experience and an idea of different people's culture and makes you realize that
> everybody is different. Respect them, just because you disagree with them doesn't make
> them a monster, a very important lesson. But the most important lesson is that
> individuals can change the world. A little determination and effort and you can achieve
> anything. That is my personal belief.

In return Amy stated:

> I, personally, have learned many new things from reading the creations myths from the Greek, Chinese, and Ugandan cultures…I have found that I have international mindedness, empathy for those who are different, while retaining pride in my own identify. I can see how or why these people believed what they did.

Katie then retorted:

> From sampling these different creation beliefs I have to be more open minded and accepting of everyone's beliefs. I find it interesting the amount of similarities that can be found between all of the myths. This leads me to a conclusion of myths, the people who told these myths were on to something about how the world was created…By reading these it has aided me in becoming more accepting of everyone's ideas and not so closed minded.

Jackie showed insight by sharing that she believed:

> God created humans; I could understand how other cultures believe in what they do. While I do have friends who believe in something I don't, I can still respect and understand their beliefs. International mindedness, I think, is very important. To be able to understand how other people develop their beliefs and culture is very important, even if you don't believe in the same thing.

Finally, Zoe shared that, "even though I have different ideas of how our world came to be I enjoyed trying to imagine what it would be like to live elsewhere and have different beliefs. These myths helped open my eyes to more culture." All of these students clearly showed and expressed great empathy for others whose believes did not match their own, thus expressed a great openness and acceptance to diversity and "the other."

"Anyone can achieve the American Dream through Hard Work and Determination" – A Positive Change in Attitude

After students participated in the pre-reading activities, activated their prior knowledge, and had a good base in vocabulary and related themes we began the reading. Oftentimes the pre-reading activities were re-visited and student's responses were modified and revised according to what they had learned or studied during the unit. For example, the *Of Beetles and Angels* anticipation guide (see appendix 1) was frequently re-visited and much of the data collection was acquired through this activity. This will be revisited and discussed in more detail in the vocabulary section of my findings; however, an essay based on the use of the anticipation guide (see appendix 5) was assigned to seventy-eight 10th grade students and responses demonstrated a change in attitude via the social justice literacy program.

The major conclusion drawn from student responses after the re-visiting and reflecting on the anticipation guide was that an infinite majority of students' opinions changed regarding the statement: "Anyone can achieve the American dream through hard work and persistence." Meghan wrote about how her opinion changed regarding this statement after reading the memoir:

> *Of Beetles and Angels* by Mawi Asgedom displayed how anyone can achieve the
>
> American Dream through hard work and determination. Mawi showed this throughout
>
> the book as he started from a little country, Sudan, to get to America and become
>
> something big. Through all the bullies, name calling and taunting Mawi turned out to be
>
> a very successful man. During the kid's school days in America it was not always easy.
>
> Mawi managed to get past this tough point in his life. He did not let anyone stop him, he
>
> knew what he wanted in life and he wanted to be successful. Mawi had not only

graduated from college, he graduated from one of the hardest colleges to get into. This

proves that anyone can achieve the American Dream if they really put their mind to it.

Mawi was saying that you have to be a focused individual so that you can be an achiever;

you can't just expect everything to come to you without trying. Mawi did an amazing job

creating himself and becoming such an amazing man. Anyone can achieve that

American dream, it's all about the choices you make, no one is going to do it for you.

This book inspired me to start doing a lot better in school so maybe one day I can be very

successful, just like Mawi.

Elise wrote:

In Mawi Asegdom's memoir, *Of Beetles and Angels*, they portrayed how anyone can

achieve the American dream through handwork and persistence. Throughout my reading

I changed my opinion multiple times regarding this statement. I went from mostly

disagreeing to moderately agreeing. I believe that most people can achieve the American

dream, with a few exceptions. Most people achieve this dream through hard work and

persistence. Mawi's brother, Tewalde, got this in his cleaning business.

Students grew more open minded about the concept of achieving the American dream after this

unit of study. More importantly students began to believe that everyone was not only capable of

achieving the American dream, but that everyone had the right to try to obtain the American

dream.

"Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* should continue to be taught in American high schools because it demonstrates strong, democratic moral principles that promote racial equality and justice, it provides students with a uniquely dynamic perspective on the racism and discrimination that occurred in the American South, and finally the novel should continue to be taught because of the huge influence it has made on the American people and society" - The Importance of Continued Teaching of Social Justice

A third, and very important theme that emerged from this research was students' perceptions of the importance of social justice and social justice literacy programs. After reading, analyzing, and discussing the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, thirty-two of my 9th grade honors students were asked to complete a persuasive essay on whether they felt *To Kill a Mockingbird* should continue to be taught in American schools despite its censorship in the past (see appendix 7). Of the thirty-two students in my honors class only two argued that *To Kill a Mockingbird* should not be taught in school, while thirty students believed that there was value and merit in the teaching of this novel through a social justice literacy program. Through the use of the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students highlighted the importance of the continued use of the text that spoke to issues of social justice. Nate (who is also one of the seven students in my focus group) argued that the text needed to remain part of the curriculum:

> Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, truly gets to the bottom of why racism in the American south during the 1930's is problematic. In addition to this virtuous, democratic wisdom that promotes equality and fairness, *To Kill a Mockingbird* provides students reading it with a unique and dynamic viewpoint concerning racism in the American South, and it has had, and continues to make, a large impact on the American

people and society. Because of these factors, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* should continue to be taught in American high schools because it demonstrates strong, democratic moral principles that promote racial equality and justice, it provides students with a uniquely dynamic perspective on the racism and discrimination that occurred in the American South, and finally the novel should continue to be taught because of the huge influence it has made on the American people and society.

Jess agreed with Nate and believed that, "*To Kill a Mockingbird* should not be banned because it shows connections with historical events, it teaches kids about racism and prejudice, and it shows how one decision can lead to many consequences." Similarly, Elise argued that, "*To Kill a Mockingbird* is a great book that teaches Americans about our past, teaches life lessons, and tells us about racism in the south." Mark concurred and stated that the novel should not be banned because, "people connect with the text, it illustrates changing American history, and it also teaches people to be more empathetic towards others." Other common reasons students believed that the novel should not be banned were because: it represented multiple perspectives, it provided an educational look on U.S. segregation, it illustrated how people were not treated equally, it showed society the validity of trying to understand others points of view, it proved that it takes unfeasible amounts of courage to do the right thing, and perhaps most importantly, Nate believed that it could shed light on how to, "prevent these tragic historical times and events from happening again and how we can correct our behavior for current and future generations."

Overall, students believed that there was value and merit in reading and studying the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* in school as a part of a social justice literacy program, as well as value and merit in a social justice literacy program period.

Developing an Understanding of Social Justice Vocabulary Acquisition

Vocabulary acquisition is a large portion of any literacy program and is connected to the fourth theme that emerged through this research. That theme is that students did not know social justice related terminology and that acquisition of social justice related vocabulary is needed in a social justice literacy program. When my 10th grade students completed the memoir *Of Beetles and Angels* anticipation guide (see appendix 1) many of the statements dealt with social justice related vocabulary terms. Below is a chart that illustrates common unknown terms from the anticipation guide related to social justice from the first time 59 students completed the guide. The numbers below each term represent the number of students out of 59 who felt that they could not define the term.

Of Beetles and Angels **Vocabulary: Numbers of Students Who Did Not Know Each Term Pre-Reading**

Social justice / Injustice	Racial Injustice	Persistence	Impartial	Bigotry	prejudice	oppressed	Economic equality	Reform societies
37	10	1	5	40	6	7	4	3

Refugee	Immigrant	Injustice	liberate	tolerance	Morally fair	Persecution
9	3	2	4	5	2	2

As students read and studied the memoir and worked with the terms their understanding shifted. Below are the number of students at the end of the unit who felt they could not define the social justice terms.

Of Beetles and Angels **Vocabulary: Numbers of Students Who Did Not Know Each Term**

Post-Reading

Social justice / Injustice	Racial Injustice	Persistence	Impartial	Bigotry	prejudice	oppressed	Economic equality	Reform societies
15	4	0	2	14	0	3	1	1

Refugee	Immigrant	Injustice	liberate	tolerance	Morally fair	persecution
5	1	2	2	1	1	1

Students were also asked after reading and studying the terms about how they felt about the vocabulary terms. During a class discussion students were asked about their feelings of studying social justice related vocabulary and how it related to the memoir.

Nick stated that, "I am so happy that I not only learned these new terms, but that I can now recognized them in the memoir and in my life."

Sami said, "At first I agreed that an immigrant is a person who flees to a foreign country to escape danger of persecution. I had strongly agreed at first, but an immigrant is not that; that is the definition of a refugee."

Chris also commented on a social justice vocabulary term, "Bigotry is defined as acting on one's prejudice. In the book bigotry happens a lot. For example the kids at school make fun of Mawi and his siblings for being skinny; they also show bigotry when they call the boys African bootie scratchers." Evan agreed about the definition of bigotry and said, "At first I didn't know what bigotry was. Now I see examples of it everywhere, not only in the book."

Tommy then chimed in and provides examples of bigotry that stuck out in his head from the book. He stated,

> There were so many examples of bigotry from the book. One is when the kids at school said, 'why don't you go back to Africa where you came from?' Being bigoted is one of the most stupid things you could do, to hurt someone that you don't know for things they have no control over is stupid!

Mac said, "I originally thought that justice was having freedom, and doing whatever you want. Now I know that justice is much more than that. Justice is being morally fair and impartial."

According to the vocabulary data collected, many students entered into the unit with little to no understanding of many social justice related terms. Through the course of study students not only acquired an understanding of social justice related vocabulary such as: bigotry, tolerance, and prejudice, but in addition began to incorporate that vocabulary into their lexicon.

Summary of Themes

Overall, four themes emerged as part of this action research study of a social justice literacy program. The most obvious is the students' overwhelming openness to diversity. Time and again students demonstrated and articulated through writing, class activities, and focus groups that they were open to diversity. They also showed great insight into the need for acceptance of those whose thoughts and ideas were different from their own. This was illustrated through the comparison and contrast of cultural myths (see appendix 6). Additionally, the themes of a change in attitude and social justice vocabulary acquisition were greatly connected. Students' attitudes changed once they understood some of the social justice vocabulary terms. There was a link between a common understanding of the terms and a shift and change in attitude. Finally, the most gratifying theme that emerged, for me personally, was students' opinions about the importance of the continued teaching of social justice in a literacy program. The vast majority of students believed and stated through their writing that the teaching of social justice issues through literature is important so that society does not repeat history and make the same mistakes again regarding democracy and basic human rights.

Chapter 5: Conclusions/Recommendations

As a result of this research I gained insights about creating and teaching a social justice literacy program. The most important conclusion drawn from my research was the need for social justice professional development. Without it, there could not be social justice literacy programs. I am going to focus my recommendations on educator professional development based on the themes that emerged through my social justice action research study, as well as on the research I conducted as a part of my literature review. Again the themes that emerged during the study include: students' openness to diversity, students' change in attitude, students' perceptions about the importance of continued teaching of social justice, and social justice vocabulary acquisition. I have four recommendations for preparing the educator to create a social justice literacy program in their classroom, or even to simply become more comfortable with multicultural education. These four recommendations include: no colorblindness and cultural competence, having the hard conversations, just say NO! to the banking model – developing a student centered classroom, and the culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy.

Evangelauf argues that "American demographers report that even as public school population are becoming increasingly more ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse, the teaching force in the U.S. is becoming more homogeneous (as cited in Jackson, 1994, p. 298). These recommendations are timely seeing as though our schools are more diverse now than ever before in history.

No Colorblindness and Cultural Competence

My first recommendation in regards to professional development of educators is to work towards eliminating colorblindness. Colorblindness is defined by Howard (2011) as the practice of not acknowledging the racial identities of students. The problem with colorblindness, Howard (2011) states, is that "there is something wrong with not being white, or that there is something embarrassing or insulting about acknowledging one's race or ethnicity." This concept of colorblindness may sound backwards when considering the goal is a social justice literacy program, but in order to truly teach and understand social justice we, as educators, have to see and acknowledge people's similarities and their differences -- race, culture and gender being some of them.

Unfortunately, some teachers perceive students of a diverse background as less capable and hold lower expectations for them; they provide them with less rigorous requirements and course work. Negative educator perceptions of diverse students not only hurt the students they are not holding to as high a standard, but also influence other classmates perceptions about those students.

Additionally, before teachers can teach their students they need to recognize where their own personal biases and misconceptions lie, and this is not only relevant for white educators. Every educator needs to take part in this self-reflection. Howard recommends that teachers, "grapple with their racial, cultural, and gender identities" (as cited in NEA Today, Fall, 2011). While this is difficult and uncomfortable for many educators, it is an imperative step. Educators need to know and be comfortable with themselves before they can teach others and truly be colorblind.

Having the Hard Conversations

We, as educators, have to recognize that race conversations are difficult, but that it is imperative that we still engage in race conversations in the classroom. The overall goal of a social justice literacy program is to reach a common understanding of some of the deepest and most complicated questions we have in our world regarding issues of equality, the "other," and mutual respect. Educators need to take a stance of modesty; they must be ready to discuss and struggle through some of the difficult topics and conversations about race and social justice issues in order to reach the overall goal of equality in the classroom. In turn, this will assist in closing the achievement gap. These conversations are hard, but necessary for us as educators and as a society. This point needs to be verbally articulated to students during class. Only when these conversations are occurring can we anticipate the tensions that are inevitable during this type of conversation about race, and work on them together as a class.

Just Say NO! to the Banking Model – Developing a Student Centered Classroom

Another recommendation for educators during professional development is to re-examine basic lesson design and to encourage teachers to redesign traditional skill and drill lessons based on what Freire (1970) refers to as "the banking model of education," which positions students as "empty vessels to be filled by the teacher." Educators need to move beyond the traditional lecture and into the mindset of designing lessons with a goal of a student-centered environment with cooperative, collaborative, and community-based learning opportunities. The model required the teacher to act as a facilitator and advocate for students, not as an authority strictly providing or "depositing" information. The question is how? My next recommendation offers suggestions for professional development models to encourage a shift away from the traditional

banking model of education. These models include: building a community out of chaos, the

critical pedagogy theory, and culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy.

Culturally Relevant/Responsive Pedagogy

I have based my recommendations for a culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy on the

suggestions of many different theorists and researchers. Again, the goal of culturally

relevant/responsive pedagogy is to bring cultural life of different groups into the view of

teaching and learning. This pedagogy is student-centered and almost the opposite of a traditional

banking model of education. In addition to teachers acting as, "cultural translators and bridge

builders," this model employs very basic strategies that many teachers already use in their

classrooms; they then must review them from a culturally sensitive perspective in order to be

successful in creating a culturally relevant/responsive classroom.

Jackson (1994) suggests seven common strategies to employ in the classroom to then

reflect on in a culturally sensitive manner. These seven strategies include: building trust,

becoming culturally literate, building a repertoire of instructional strategies, using effective

questioning techniques, providing effective feedback, analyzing instructional materials, and

establishing positive home-school relations. My recommendations are going to focus on two,

becoming culturally literate and analyzing instructional materials, of these seven strategies in

depth.

The first strategy I believe is impetrative in creating a culturally relevant/responsive

classroom is becoming culturally literate. Delpit recommends that teachers use,

Ethnographic procedures to learn about their culturally diverse students. These

procedures may include observing students in non-school settings: visiting community

churches, talking to community leaders, and making home visits, thus allowing teachers

not only to learn about nonmainstream communities, but also to tap the community's rich

resources to incorporate in their classes (as cited in Jackson, 1994, p. 300).

If teachers take the time to employ this strategy, students will begin to see the respect and

commitment that the teacher has for not only their students, but their students culture, thus

fostering a more culturally relevant/responsive classroom model.

The second strategy that I feel will help contribute greatly to a culturally

responsive/relevant pedagogy or classroom is for teachers to review and analyze instructional

materials. Exactly what materials are being used and what perspective or point of view is being

represented? The most important step in incorporating more cultural relevant materials in the

classroom is to assess the quality of the materials. Jackson (1994), provides some detailed

criteria for this assessment.

1. [Is the material providing an] accurate portrayal of the perspectives, attitudes, and feelings of the groups being studied?

2. [Does the material provide an] inclusion of strong ethnic characters in fictional works?

3. [Are the] ethnic materials devoid of racist concepts, clichés, phrases, or words?

4. [Are the materials] historically accurate factual materials?

Even if the school district has a prescribed list of materials that must be used, teachers can

supplement culturally relevant materials into their lessons and units based on the criteria Jackson

has provided.

Chapter 6: Reflections

Completing this research project has been a long, but fulfilling process. I have learned so much about myself as an educator. Additionally, this project has helped me develop and mature as an English teacher. I have grown because I am no longer as idealistic in my educational philosophy as I was prior to completing this project. In addition to learning about myself as an educator, I have also learned much about my students.

During the progression of my study several questions surfaced including the following:

1. Will students begin looking at the world through different points of view or perspectives?

2. Will I succeed and encourage students' tolerance and compassion for the "other?"

3. Will students become more aware of their prejudices and beliefs, and in turn become more empathetic of the "other?"

4. If nothing else, will my students be more cognizant of their words and actions, and think before they sling hurtful and bigoted comments?

5. Will students not only learn social justice vocabulary, but also be able to see examples of it in literature and in life?

I was propelled into researching social justice in the classroom from the overwhelming prejudice and bigotry I witnessed throughout my teaching career. I did learn from this process that while oftentimes students' words and actions are not appropriate, they often do not mean to be malicious or hurtful. They are immature or simply trying to "fit in." While these reasons do not excuse their behavior, I have come to realize that they are not inherently evil; they just are uneducated or immature and are in need of guidance.

This understanding propelled me into my second realization--social justice literacy programs cannot exist without strong professional development of teachers regarding race, culture, ethnicity, and gender. Thus, my recommendations focused not on students, but rather on my realization of the increasingly strong need for social justice related professional development for teachers in our increasingly diverse schools.

A third thing that I learned about my students is that often their actions in the halls or with their friends are opposite of their written or verbal responses within the social justice literacy program. When I witnessed this behavior once the unit ended I felt extremely defeated. While my data suggested that students were hungry to talk about social justice issues, I was disappointed when I heard racial, religious, and sexual orientation slurs in the hallway once the unit ended. This further demonstrated to me the need for continued work of all staff on issues related to social justice. There is an overwhelming need to embrace social justice related dialogue. Together, as an educational society, we can help put an end to prejudice and bigoted thoughts and actions from our youth, thus putting an end to many prejudiced and bigoted thoughts and actions in society as a whole. After completing this research I truly believe that through literature and discussion students can examine social problems and become committed to a more socially just society.

Role of the Researcher

My primary role as the researcher was to recruit participants, protect their safety, anonymity and confidentiality, and gather and analyze data. Being both the researcher and teacher could have been detrimental to my project; however, it proved to be beneficial for a few reasons. One, my research and data collection came at the end of the school year, so I had built up communication and trust within in the classroom and with my students. They in turn felt

comfortable sharing thoughts, ideas, and insights both with me as well as in front of their classmates. Second, by developing strong relationships with my students over the course of the school year, they were more willing not only to participate, but also to truly express their feelings with not only myself, but also in front of their classmates, especially when discussing sensitive content and emotions.

Limitations

The largest limitation throughout the process of this project was having a dual role as both a researcher and teacher. It became very evident and progressively more important to reflect on the process and students' perceptions and responses in an unbiased way. This study was based on my own experiences in the classroom. The focus group and interview data is not representative of the entire student population I saw during the school year, or even the full number of students I had in my classes, but rather, the data comes mainly from the students who were willing to participate.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Anticipation Guide – Social Justice: *Beetles & Angels*

Directions: On the continuum in front of each of the numbers, place an "x" that indicates where you stand in regard to the statement that follows. Be prepared to defend and support your opinions with specific examples. After reading the text and learning additional vocabulary terms compare your opinions on those statements with your personal opinions, as well as the author's implied and/or stated messages.
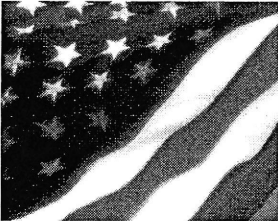
Do **NOT** lose! We will re-visit this guide frequently throughout the unit and I will collect it at the end.
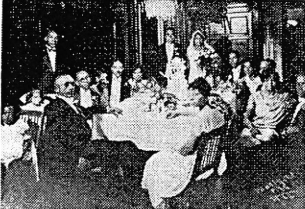
Agree   Disagree

--------------------------- 1. Racial injustice does not exist in the United States.

----------------------- 2. Anyone can achieve the American dream through hard work and Persistence.

----------------------- 3. Justice means morally fair and impartial.

----------------------- 4. Social injustices exist today.

----------------------- 5. Effective communication can be used as a tool to bring about social change.

----------------------- 6. People in the United States have economic equality.

----------------------- 7. Social justice seeks to right wrongs that are being done.

----------------------- 8. Social justice does not want to liberate the oppressed or reform society.

----------------------- 9. Tolerance is defined as a fair, objective attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, religion, nationality, etc., differ from one's own.

----------------------- 10. Bigotry is defined as acting on one's prejudices.

----------------------- 11. Individual people can create positive social change.

-----------------------12. Prejudice is an unfavorable opinion or feeling formed beforehand or without knowledge, thought, or reason.

-----------------------13. Racial injustice exists in other parts of the world.

-----------------------14. A refugee is a person who comes to America illegally.

-----------------------15. An immigrant is a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution.

Appendix 2

A Raisin in the Sun Gallery Walk	• Goal = predict the setting (time and location) of the play • Predict two possible themes in the play • Activate prior knowldege and connect with the play

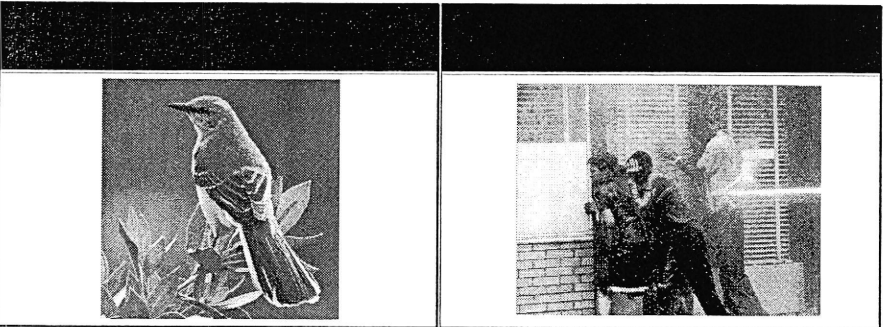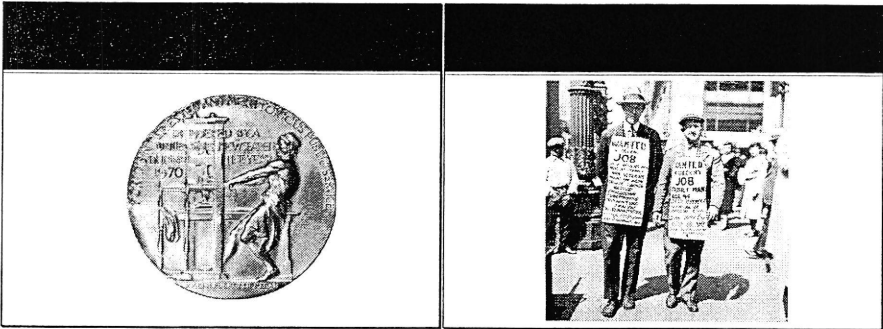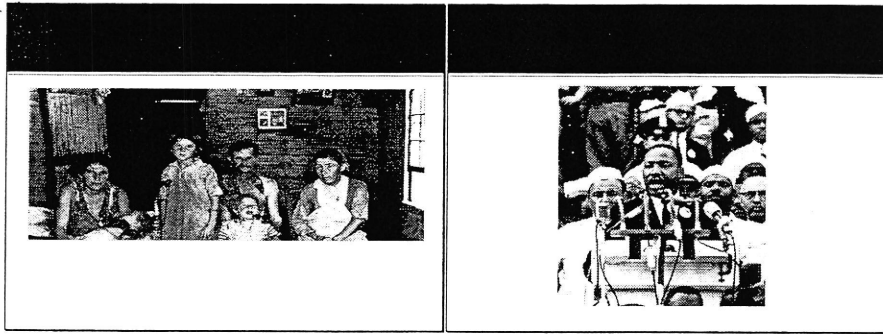|	

What do I do?
 	
• As you view the images write down the following:
   – feelings
   – emotions evoked
   – predictions about how they relate to the novel
   – Connections
	1

2 	**3**

4

5

6

Dream Deferred
What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

~Langston Hughes

7

8

9
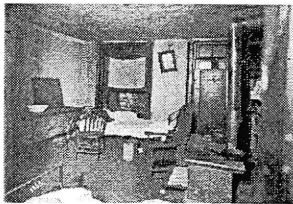
10

11
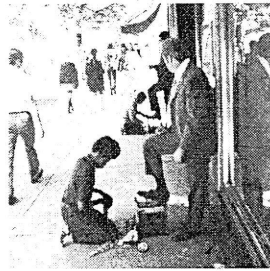
12

13

What Can I Do?
Plenty, Sister!

14

15
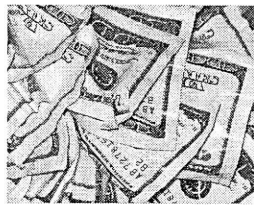
16

17
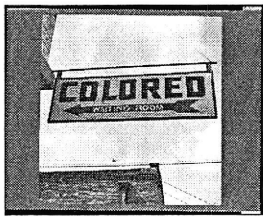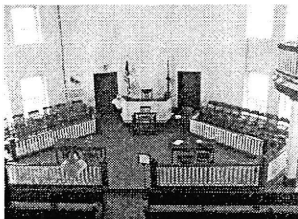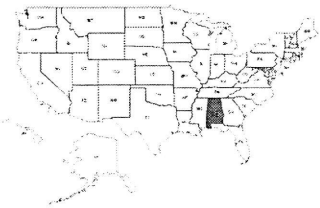
Theme	Setting

Appendix 3

Harper Lee
To Kill a Mockingbird

Goal

- Goal = predict the setting (time and location) of the novel
- Predict two possible themes in the novel

Look and Reflect

- As you view the images write down the following:
  - feelings
  - emotions evoked
  - predictions about how they relate to the novel
  - Connections

Themes   Setting

Setting

- 1933-1935
- Maycomb Alabama

Challenged Books

- Challenged in Eden Valley, Minn. (1977) and temporarily banned due to words "damn" and "whore lady" used in the novel.
- Challenged in the Vernon Verona Sherill, N.Y School District (1980) as a "filthy, trashy novel;"
- Challenged at the Warren, Ind. Township schools (1981) because the book does "psychological damage to the positive integration process " and "represents institutionalized racism under the guise of good literature." After unsuccessfully banning Lee's novel, three black parents resigned from the township human relations advisory council.
- Challenged in the Waukegan, Ill. School District (1984) because the novel uses the word "nigger."
- Challenged in the Kansas City, Mo. junior high schools (1985).
- Challenged at the Park Hill, Mo. Junior High School (1985) because the novel "contains profanity and racial slurs." Retained on a supplemental eighth grade reading list in the Casa Grande, Ariz. Elementary School District (1985), despite the protests by black parents and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People who charged the book was unfit for junior high use.
- Challenged at the Santa Cruz, Calif. Schools (1995) because of its racial themes. Removed from the Southwood High School Library in Caddo Parish, La. (1995) because the book's language and content were objectionable.
- Challenged at the Moss Point, Miss. School District (1996) because the novel contains a racial epithet. Banned from the Lindale, Tex. advanced placement English reading list (1996) because the book "conflicted with the values of the community."
- Challenged by a Glynn County, Ga. (2001) school board member because of profanity. The novel was retained. Returned to the freshman reading list at Muskogee, Okla. High School (2001) despite complaints over the years from black students and parents about racial slurs in the text.
- Challenged in the Normal, ILL Community High Schools sophomore literature class (2003) as being degrading to African Americans.
- Challenged at the Stanford Middle School in Durham, N.C. (2004) because the 1961 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel uses the word "nigger." Source: 2004 Banned Books Resource Guide.

Appendix 4

To Kill a Mockingbird: Anticipation Guide
Directions: Come up with a number that best reflects your views and then explain why you feel the way you feel.
"1" - strongly agree, "2" - agree somewhat, "3" - disagree somewhat, "4" - strongly disagree.

1. The U.S. court system upholds the statement, "all men are created equal."
2. If you are innocent, you have no need to fear the judicial system.
3. Adults understand things more accurately than children do.
4. If you know you are going to fail at something, it's pointless to even try.
5. "Acting like a girl" is a bad thing.
6. Nobody is completely bad or completely good.
7. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."
8. The way a person speaks reveals a great deal about that person.
9. After the Civil War, African Americans were treated the same as any other citizens of the United States.
10. If you kill another person, you should always be punished.
11. It's wrong to hate anyone.
12. All people are generally good.
13. Children should not be allowed to read about, watch, or listen to news reports or court cases that involve rape.
14. It's okay to be different.
15. Some words are so offensive that they should never be stated or written.
16. Speaking standard grammar proves that a person is smart.
17. A hero is born, not made.
18. No one is above the law.
19. Education is the great equalizer.
20. When the law does not succeed in punishing criminals, citizens should.

Appendix 5

B&A Anticipation Guide Essay

1. Re-visit anticipation guide for the last time – mark with a dot.
2. Reflect – choose the one question from the guide where your opinion changed the most drastically or most frequently.
3. Write a cause/effect written response describing why/how your opinion changed – you may format your response however you like…but please consider your paragraphing.
4. Your introduction must explain what question you are choosing to write about from the anticipation guide – please provide your reader with a thesis and a preview of some sort.
5. Support with at 3 least ICE quotes from B&A and/or Eritrea Article

Appendix 6

Compare and Contrast of Cultural Creation Myths

Step 1: Brainstorm all of the similarities and differences that you can between the 3 myths (Greek, Chinese, Ugandan)

Refer to your Cornell notes, summaries, and the text for information.

You can format your brainstorm however you like visually Ex: Venn diagram

Step 2: Narrow your ideas: Choose to discuss in your written response the most interesting and unique ideas that you brainstormed.

Step 3: Write your compare and contrast analysis of cultural creation myths

Requirements:
1. One good solid paragraph comparing with at least one ICE quote (paragraph must mention all three myths).
2. One good solid paragraph contrasting with at least one ICE quote (paragraph must mention all 3 myths)
This is academic writing so avoid first person and write in present tense.

3. Even though we all hold different believes about creation, what did you personally learn, or come to believe as a result of reading different cultures explanations of creation? Tie your response to the definition of international mindedness below. (This can be written in first person).

Definition of international mindedness:

A growing inclination toward:

- An understanding and celebration of the value of diversity, in all its forms.

- Empathy for those who are different, while retaining pride in one's own identity.

- Open-minded inquiry accompanied by critical thinking about what is discovered via that inquiry.

- An understanding that individuals can improve the state of the world, and an accompanying acceptance of the responsibility to take action to do so.

Appendix 7

Persuasive Essay Assignment

To Kill a Mockingbird has been challenged for years. There are a variety of reasons why this book has been challenged, censored, or even banned. Typically books are banned because they challenge someone's morals, beliefs, or deal with content that is felt to be inappropriate for students; *To Kill a Mockingbird* is **not** an exception to the rule.

You will be writing a paper defending the continued teaching of *To Kill a Mockingbird* **or** defending reasons why it should no longer be taught in school. You will need to support your argument using evidence from the text, as well as evidence from at least 2 additional reliable secondary sources. You will need to cite your information, using ICE quoting in correct MLA format and include a works cited page.

Appendix 8

International Mindedness Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. After studying international mindedness, what exactly does the term mean to you?
2. What does empathy mean to you in regards to social justice and the creation myths you read?
3. How can you take what you have read in these myth and learned in regards to international mindedness and apply it to you world and PHS?

Appendix 9

Persuasive *To Kill a Mockingbird* Essay Focus Group Discussion Question

1. Should To Kill a Mockingbird be banned and/or censored or taught in American public schools – Why or why not?