World War II and Beyond: Middle School Inquiry and Critical Literacy

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The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of adolescents as they began to develop critical literacy skills as part of an inquiry project in an integrated social studies/language arts classroom. Critical literacy, as I define it here, is about having the skills and desire to critique society and the world, particularly on issues of power (Wolk, 2003). Those who challenge traditional education argue that schools generally aspire to socialize children into the dominant beliefs of our society, rather than trying to transform society into a more socially just culture (McDaniel, 2004). Rooted in the work of Freire (2000), critical literacy theory is not a set of teaching methods but a philosophy that calls for a transformation. Instead of the author holding the power, the use of critical literacy empowers the reader. A critically literate person understands that the author writes from a particular perspective but is also aware that the author's perspective is not the only perspective (Molden, 2007).

This exploratory study is limited in scope because it was meant to address the early stages of critical literacy development in young adolescents. More specifically, the adolescents involved in this project were learning to evaluate textbook authors' values and goals and to recognize that all the voices are not heard in textbooks. It is important to note that this project does not encompass a comprehensive list of possibilities for reading from a critical literacy stance.

Teaching Critical Consciousness

Teaching students to be critically conscious is a matter of providing them with the conceptual tools to evaluate the inequalities and injustices of society (Kretovics, 1985). The critique generally revolves around issues of culture, race, class, gender, the environment, and media, with the view of creating a more just, humane, and democratic world (Wolk, 2003). By nature, middle school language arts classes serve as excellent venues for teaching critical literacy. In the language arts classroom, students are given the opportunity to think critically about literature and to question authors' intents. Social studies, in turn, serves well for teaching critical literacy, since textbooks are generally biased and have traditionally been written from the perspectives of the victors, while often ignoring the voices of minorities, the poor, and women (Loewen, 1994; Zinn, 1995).

Teachers who strive to have students become critically literate have a completely different vision from that of teachers whose aim is to have students become technically literate in basic skills of reading and writing. In order to move toward a critical literacy perspective, teachers will have to rethink their usual textbook practices and search for alternative resources (Wolk, 2003). One method that allows for use of a wide variety of resources for information gathering is inquiry, which also works well for exploration of controversial issues (Wolk, 1998).

Mrs. Benson's intention for the project was to employ a style of pedagogy that would allow these seventh- and eighth-grade students to become empowered, thinking individuals, rather than passive receivers of factual textbook knowledge. Her basic requirement was that students investigate a self-selected historical event that occurred sometime between the advent of World War II and the end of the Gulf War. Each student would explore the event from a variety of sources, including the perspective of a living person who played a direct part in the event or was indirectly affected by it. It is important to note that when no living person was available, students could substitute an interview posted on the Internet or some other source.

Studying a variety of perspectives provided students with evidence beyond the textbook, while studying a singular perspective provided insights into the "invisible" people who are seldom discussed in books. If critical literacy has been meant to empower, we cannot ignore the implicit messages that occur through sources of
information beyond traditional texts. With the advent of multimedia and its accompanying messages, critical literacy needs to respond to changes in the definition of literacy itself (Lemke, 2006). That is, a text can be present in multiple genres of communication, including videos, film clips, and information literacy (Elmborg, 2006). Without tools for critical multimedia literacy, in addition to print texts, students cannot make value choices about their world. Therefore, the project began with an introduction to critical media literacy skills but later focused on the contents of a textbook, as compared to a living person's story.

My goal for this exploratory study was to describe how teaching through this type of inquiry resulted in more powerful learning and heightened awareness of multiple viewpoints. Besides being instruction that disrupts the stereotypical vision of English and social studies as boring and removed from the students' worlds, inquiry is one form of instruction that may cause students to view society in different ways. I considered this project as only a single step in the process of educating for critical literacy.

Theoretical Framework
Advocates of adolescent literacy have called attention to the limited scope of content literacy, which has traditionally focused on information transmitted from teachers and textbooks (Behrman, 2003). Social studies, in particular, has often been taught as a set of uncontroversial historical facts to be memorized by students and then forgotten (Cuban, 1991). Pedagogy as such is often met with resistance on the part of students, who tend to avoid reading the text, which is often difficult and lacks relevance to their lives.

Inquiry, on the other hand, is designed to transfer responsibility of constructing knowledge to students (Lindfors, 1999; Wells, 1999), thereby making it more meaningful and relevant (Meyerson & Secules, 2001). According to the National Research Council (NRC), inquiry keeps learners actively engaged in discovery of phenomena and exploration of interesting issues (NRC, 2000). The five essential features of inquiry are as follows: student-generated questions, planned investigations, collection and analysis of data, explanation of the findings, and sharing and justification of findings. Inquiry, as such, results in exploration of issues from more than one author or informant; the result is that students are empowered to challenge the singular perspective of a single text.

When students read from a critically literate perspective, they are encouraged to adopt a questioning stance toward a wide range of texts, including those that transcend the traditional notion of text (McDaniel, 2004). The component of critical literacy that sets it apart from critical reading is the social action it is meant to foster. Transformation as a way of thinking about the world is the expected outcomes of critical literacy (Freire, 2000). One study of adolescent girls who used critical literacy through a variety of textual practices was met with only partial success (Lalik & Oliver, 2007). The limitations and problems of implementing pedagogy that acknowledges the political nature of literacy confirms the need for more research in this area.

Methodology
Participants
For this qualitative case study, I visited a middle school in Midwestern United States. One teacher, Barbara Benson (pseudonym), and her multi-age seventh and eighth grade language arts/social studies class were observed and interviewed during the month-long unit. There were 23 students in the class, and I opted to conduct more in-depth interviews with a group of key student informants who were each representative of the various topic groups (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Data Collection and Analysis
Observations took place during regular school hours, particularly on days when Mrs. Benson was discussing the project or allowing students to work during class time. I also observed and videotaped classroom dramatizations, at the same time taking note of audience reactions, comments, and questions.

Students were interviewed individually and alternately in groups of two or three. I began with three open-ended questions, as follows:
1. How do you feel about doing this inquiry project, compared to your usual textbook reading?
2. What information were you able to gain from readings and interviews that you didn't already know about or that you have not read about in a textbook?
3. In what ways was the information different than what you have read about in your textbook? Why do you think so?
4. Why do you think his information would or would not be in a textbook?

The teacher was interviewed individually, and interviews began with open-ended questions. Over time, questioning evolved about instruction I had observed, student behaviors and productivity, as well as her perspectives on the learning that was taking place.

During data collection, a log of data transcriptions was kept and initial analysis was ongoing and recursive. Data was analyzed using the constant comparison method, which means that analysis began early in the study with a search for trends and themes in what informants said, did, and shared, compared across participants and situations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results
The project began with students viewing a 1942 propaganda movie, “Menace of the Rising Sun,” which was meant to incite Americans against the Japanese at the onset of WWII. As one student, Jazz, noted, the movie...
“showed horrible stuff.” Mrs. Benson guided students to think about the movie from a critical perspective. Through open discussion, students were asked to: 1) look at how the information was portrayed and for what purpose, 2) decide what facts were included or excluded, 3) and to examine the specific elements that were meant to manipulate the viewers. Over the next few days, students read other examples of media and texts to search for hidden biases and issues of power.

The next phase of the project was to have students self-select a topic or incident that occurred between the onset of WWII and the Gulf War. Mrs. Benson handed out a list of possible inquiry topics, which students could explore in the social studies textbook. Once topics were chosen, students worked in groups of peers to investigate a common interest. Some materials, such as biographies, reference books, and general non-fiction books, were available in the classroom for student use; additionally, students could leave class to find further materials in the library. For online exploration, Mrs. Benson provided laptops from the computer lab. Volunteer teacher-aides were often present in the classroom, because students often needed help with locating information, information processing (e.g., saving data, delayed printouts), and writing and editing scripts.

Based on observations and interviews with Mrs. Benson and her class, student motivation for the World War II and Beyond Project was high. Mrs. Benson remarked that “the students do complain, but the further they get, they’re having fun.” Most students seemed genuinely engaged in the process of researching their topics, creating interview questions, and writing scripts for the final skit. I attributed this engagement to the fact that they were able to self-select a topic, interview someone important to them, and create their own presentations. Still, there were a total of six students who needed prompting and support to complete each task in a timely and efficient manner.

Most students selected a topic based on their heritage or a connection to an event. For example, two girls of Indian heritage explored Indian independence from Great Britain. Another student, Luke, had a Chinese grandfather who lived through horrors that occurred during the Sino-Japanese War. Still another interviewed a grandparent who had been overseas during WWII and missed the birth of his child in the states.

In order to assess students’ emerging understanding of the author’s power within a text, the following sections describe how students made sense of new information and compared it to information in their textbooks.

Desert Storm
When asked how the project may have changed their previous views of the event studied, several students reported that they learned new information that they had never read or known about previously. Steve, the student whose topic was Desert Storm, talked about how his grandfather had to watch a soldier die. “He [grandfather] said that one of the hardest things to do was to get soldiers to board the plane for war, because they were so afraid to die. Once they got to Saudi Arabia, there were more problems like ‘How’m I gonna find room for 600 people to sleep?” He also found it difficult to take soldiers into battle, because if they never came back, he felt it was his fault.

Steve said that his grandfather was probably not important enough to be in a textbook, even though he’d received a purple heart. He added, “Textbooks don’t care what people thought. They just say the facts.” While Steve believed that textbooks do state facts, he seemed to imply that authors can choose which facts to emphasize, de-emphasize, or eliminate.

Sino-Japanese Wars
Luke’s group found most of their information about the Second Sino-Japanese war through interviews and the Internet. He said, “We found out that there were whole bunch of killings and wrong things done to innocent women.” Luke felt that eyewitnesses tell the story better and with more details than any textbook did. He added that the information helped him understand the plight of innocent victims during wartime, which was often de-emphasized in textbooks.

Hitler Youth Movement
Lacey, a student who researched the Hitler Youth Movement, reported on her experience with the project. “It’s weird, because we have to play Hitler and he was a bad person. He took over all the Jews and made them do work and stuff and killed all the children. The Holocaust was a bad thing but I still like to learn about it.” In answer to the question about the how facts are described in textbooks, she replied that “it’s just opinions about what they think happened. Texts only have certain things and certain things aren’t written in the text.” Lacey’s mention of “opinions” seems to indicate some awareness that facts are only someone’s opinion.

Women’s Philanthropic Group during Vietnam
Allison and her group researched an organization of women who sent letters overseas during Vietnam. They answered the textbook question, saying, “The textbook didn’t mention the women because they weren’t publicly known. It wasn’t that big of an organization. They met at different places and sent packages overseas at Christmas.” Also, these women summarized the newspaper for the soldiers and tried to tell them only happy news to keep their morale up. Sometimes the soldiers wrote back to individual women. The mother of another student in Allison’s group had been a member of that organization and was able to be interviewed. Like Steve, Allison based exclusion by the author on lack of importance.
Kamikazi Pilots
Ana studied Kamikazi pilots, otherwise known as Divine Wind. She was unable to conduct an interview, but her group found much of their information on the Internet. She added, “I think it’s a cool way to learn what has happened.” Ana thought of these facts as interesting and much better than textbook reading. She talked about how these men did not really want to die but felt it was their duty and honor to die and that it pleased the family. They often met with other pilots before boarding the planes to prepare for death and to calm their fears so they wouldn’t turn back. Much of the information that her group found was explained from the Japanese point of view. According to Ana, the textbook did not include this type of information about Kamikazi pilots. Because the Internet reports were written from a Japanese perspective, the students were able to read from a different point of view than the textbook.

Pearl Harbor – Black Nurses
Tamara was one of the girls who studied the roles of black nurses after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. She said, “Textbooks were probably written by white men, and white men do not write about black nurses. The text is about presidents and men like that – not women.” Tamara was interviewed with two other girls from her group, and the others agreed with this perspective, demonstrating their awareness of inequities involving race and gender. Jazz added, “They do not write about women. I think they mentioned something about the wife of FDR once.” Prior to the project, none of these girls had been aware that black nurses existed in Pearl Harbor. The girls discovered that of 50,000 nurses in Pearl Harbor only 579 were black and were only allowed to care for black men. The girls in this group were clearly aware of textbook inequities based on race and gender.

Insights
Several students expressed a common insight about textbooks, as when Jared said, “...people’s experiences might not seem interesting or important to people who write textbooks.” This comment echoed Steve’s perspective – that “important” people and facts are included, while less important ones are not. Another well-pondered idea emerged from Mike, who postulated that “Textbook writers might think some things are be too scary for kids to hear about – like the Holocaust. Some parents might not even like having their kids hear about that.” Mike’s view aligned well with that of Wollman-Bonilla (1998), who wrote about censorship of reading material by parents and teachers who attempt to protect children from troubling realities. Yet, while parents and educators only mean to protect, such restrictions are limiting to learning.

In answering the question of how this type of learning compared to reading a textbook, more than half the students mentioned that their discoveries through inquiry were much more interesting than facts in a textbook.

Luke, for example, felt that eyewitnesses were far more valuable to learn from. He added, “We can definitely learn more about other countries and what they did to other people for no reason.” He added that he enjoyed hands-on learning. Allison, who explored the women’s group during Vietnam, said that “...you never realize how it feels to be overseas and get a letter. You won’t read that in a textbook. Textbooks don’t tell about feelings.” Lacey, also, enjoyed researching the Hitler Youth Movement because “it’s the kind of information you learn the way you wanna learn.” Besides the fact that students could select a topic of particular interest to them, they indicated that the project involved a variety of skills beyond traditional reading and writing. For Jazz, the reason was a simple one. She explained, “We usually read the chapter and do outlines. I don’t like outlines.”

Only five students explicitly preferred textbook reading, mainly because it was a familiar activity and was far less time consuming. Surprisingly, while Steven brought in a wealth of information about Desert Storm, he was one of the few who preferred textbook reading and outlines to inquiry. His reasoning was that it was “a lotta work. Projects take super long and if you get an F you get an F.” This reaction did not surprise Mrs. Benson, because she affirmed that he was not very fond of work and it took a lot of prompting to get him to carry out the various steps of the project.

For the culminating activity, each student shared findings with the rest of the class through skits that had to be memorized and timed. Groups could ask other classmates to play a role in their skit if more actors were needed. Mrs. Benson did deduct points if students failed to remember their lines, and actors were additionally rated by their peers through a check sheet. Besides helping them learn the subject matter, Mrs. Benson believed that creation of skits gave students the chance to express how they perceived their chosen topics. Student skits proved to be very creative, as when Hiroshima was bombed by a toy airplane that dropped a golf ball onto a village of Lego blocks. Another was presented on the Sino-Japanese War, where Luke, dressed as an old Mao Tse-Tung, sat in a rocking chair and told stories of his life, humiliations by the Japanese, and his war triumphs. As he spoke, actors would come on stage to act out his memories. At some points, Luke would retreat backstage and emerge as a young Chinese Mao Tse-Tung. Among the students who performed a skit on the Hitler Youth Movement was Joshua, who dressed like Hitler with a mustache and helmet and spoke with a German accent for the skit.

Skits seemed to have the most empowering effect on these middle school students. It gave them voice to express their interpretations of the media, texts, and Internet information they accessed.

Conclusion
Since inquiry involves wondering and questioning, it
naturally involves the critical thinking skills of evaluation, synthesis, application, and inference (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). In this instance, inquiry also had the potential to expand students' knowledge beyond the textbook. It caused them to question "factual information" and seek answers that cannot be found in textbooks alone. It helped them to see the world through different eyes.

As a result of this project, students' literacy development was enhanced, in the sense that they had begun to think critically about what they read, but only to a limited degree; they developed a deeper conceptual understanding of chosen topics. While they were able to identify elements that were missing or biased in texts, these students were only at the brink of becoming critically literate individuals. Their reasoning was sometimes limited to their own experience.

The outcome of this study serves as an exemplar to teachers, preservice teachers, curriculum writers, and anyone involved in the education of adolescents. If it is true that qualitative studies do not have conclusions but only serve to create more questions (Wolcott, 2001), then continued study is warranted. A potential strand of future research would be to further explore the acquisition of critical literacy skills in different contexts and/or through different forms of pedagogy. Socratic seminars, literature circles, and pre- and post-reading activities would serve as excellent forums for such exploration.

The significance of this research lies in the active nature of a learning experience that allowed for empowerment in two ways: 1) From a critical literacy stance, readers were encouraged to question the status quo, 2) Through inquiry, students were challenged to explore and construct their own knowledge about the world. Results hold strong implications for becoming more responsible and informed citizens. Moje (2000) suggested that, besides the need for content knowledge, literacy strategies, and writing, students at the middle and secondary levels need a purpose for engaging in literacy activities. More specifically, they need to learn how to use literacy as a tool for achieving different goals. For this inquiry-based project, the goal was to discover the answers to one's questions and to become more cognizant of the inequalities that pervade our world.

References


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