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Students as agents of change

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STUDENTS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

by Meghan Lynch

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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Students as Agents of Change
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The purpose of this study was to examine how literacy instruction encouraged students to think of themselves as agents of change. Using a qualitative design, a case study examined the effect literacy instruction had on students' perceptions of themselves as agents of change. The study took place in a fifth grade inclusion classroom of twenty three students. Journal prompts and class discussions were utilized to gather data. The data collected was analyzed and categorized according to student responses. Significant findings pointed that students were willing to think of themselves as agents of change.

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Chapter One

We are the children of the world, and despite

our different backgrounds, we share a common reality.

We are united by our struggle to make the world a better place

for all. You call us the future but we are also the present.

(Bellamy, 2002, p. 67)

<u>Introduction</u>

As the students entered the classroom Monday morning, the excitement in their voices could only mean one thing, the holidays were rapidly approaching. The students discussed all that they wanted to do over the holiday break and all of the presents the hoped to receive. While the students unpacked their belongings, the principal could be heard over the loud speaker going over the morning announcements. It was the usual list of morning announcements.

Lunch today will be grilled cheese and tomato soup.

Band practice will begin at 3:15.

Bully posters are due on the 17th.

Donations for this year's toy drive will be collected up until the end of the day on Friday.

The students then stood for the pledge.

As homework was checked by the teacher, I could hear the students commenting on the announcements. One group of students talked of their love of grilled cheese.

Another group of students discussed in great detail the plan for their bully poster. Several students in the back of the room were complaining about having to go to band practice at the end of the day. None of the students were discussing what they would bring in for the toy drive, which was to benefit a local charity.

By Friday, of the twenty-five students in the class, only seven students had brought in a donation for the toy drive. When asked why they had not brought in a donation, one student replied, "My mom forgot."

<u>Purpose Statement</u>

In the world today, adults are presented with a plethora of opportunities to help out those less fortunate than themselves, the opportunity to be agents of change. How often are the children in schools presented with such opportunities? The answer is probably more than we think. So, then, why are not more children active in promoting change in their community and world? Maybe it is because they do not know how.

The purpose of this research is to determine how instruction in reading and writing can be used to increase students' acceptance and understanding of others who are different than themselves. As the vignette points out, too often students are quick to team up and turn onto those who they view as different. Giroux (1993) speaks of being literate as being able to participate in "a dialogue with others who speak from different histories, locations, and experiences" (p. 367-368). Through literacy instruction, therefore, children can learn how to speak with other people from backgrounds different than their own. It is important for children to learn how to speak with others from differing backgrounds because according to Giroux (1993), "people read the world differently depending on class, gender, race, and politics" (p. 368). Furthermore, literacy instruction

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can be used because multiple perspectives can be represented in literature. DeVoogd (2006) discusses how filmmakers, authors, and journalists "carefully pick their own realities to persuade, entertain, or make a point" (p. 49). Giroux's (1993) definition of the function of schools, "the purpose and meaning of schooling extend beyond the function of a museum safeguarding the treasures of cultural tradition or the needs of the corporate state for more literate workers" (p. 372), therefore literature instruction should challenge students to think critically, looking beyond their own backgrounds to the backgrounds of others.

Statement of Research Problem and Question

Inside classrooms, students are exposed to a multitude of information. Some of the information they find intriguing, some of it utterly boring, and still some of the information they find completely confusing. How much of this information forces students to think critically? How much of this information inspires students to become active citizens, having a positive impact on their community? Literacy instruction has the potential to be the answer to both of these questions.

My research question asks, *How can literacy instruction be used to encourage students to think of themselves as agents of change?* An accompanying question is: *How can literacy instruction be used to encourage critical thinking in students?*

Story of the Question

The previous vignette actually happened in a classroom I observed in my practicum placement. The students were indifferent to the idea of helping out a local charity, and even blamed their parents for their inaction. The students in this class were from middle to upper middle class homes, where money was rarely, if ever, an issue.

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These students were in a position to help, to make another person's holiday better, happier. However, the majority of the students in the class took no action.

I wondered about these students. Had they ever helped out another person out of the good of their heart and not for some type of superficial reward? What if the morning announcements had been about something other than a toy drive? What if the principal had asked the students to help to overcome a serious injustice in their community, would the students have acted then? These students had learned about the Civil Rights Movement in previous years. Average, everyday Americans had risked everything to stand up against a gross injustice. Did this not inspire the students to grab any opportunity that arose to help others?

After speaking with the teacher in the class, my mind began to race. She showed me her plans for Black History Month. The students were going to read several stories about people like Ruby Bridges and Rosa Parks and then complete an assortment of literacy activities. The stories were excellent, they told of what these two figures had done, as well as painted a picture of what it was like to be in their shoes.

These stories gave me an idea. Literacy instruction has the ability to inform and inspire. Literacy instruction can be used to expose students to other possibilities, show them that they too can be agents of change like Rosa and Ruby. How could literacy instruction be used to help students think of themselves as agents of change?

<u>Organization of the Thesis</u>

Chapter Two is an in-depth look at the related research on literature instruction and critical literacy. Some of the topics addressed in Chapter Two include the history of peace education, the potential for literature in the classroom, peaceful classrooms,

kindness, global citizenry, cooperative learning, and critical literacy. Chapter Three is a discussion of the context of the study as well as the design of the research and methodology. Chapters Four and Five discuss the results of the study as well as the implications for future research.

Chapter Two:

<u>Review of Literature</u>

To help students to think of themselves as agents of change, literacy instruction can be used to expose students to the world of change and how they can be active in it. The review of the following literature looks at what components make for the most effective literacy instruction as well as the importance of teaching students to take a critical look at the world around them. Henry Giroux (1993) and Linda Christensen (2000) are just two of many, who view literacy as the pathway to addressing and discussing diversity in the classroom while still adhering to the requirements of NCLB. Giroux (1993), Christensen (2000), and others view literacy instruction as the pathway to teaching students to be more open to diversity in their everyday lives.

Peace education, as defined by Marcia L. Johnson (1998) author of *Trends in Peace Education,* is curricula that includes "instruction of conflict resolution; cooperation and interdependence, global awareness; and social and ecological responsibility" (p. 1). Peace education can be traced back to the early nineteenth century in the United States (Johnson, 1998). Johnson (1998) writes that "a small group of New England educators, writers, and thinkers" were some of the first people to really push peace education (p. 1). One such person, Horace Mann, "considered violence in American society a flaw that required deliberate improvement and asserted that education should be the primary agent of change" (Johnson, 1998 p. 1). Throughout time, peace education has changed its form depending on the world climate, however what has not changed over time is the overall

goal of peace education, which is "the desire to improve the condition of human society" (Johnson, 1998 p. 1). During the 1980s, peace education "took the form of 'conflict resolution'" using "training in cross-cultural issues, interpersonal communication, and bias awareness with the belief that individuals must understand the nature of conflict and develop negotiating skills before the process of mediation can be effective" (Johnson, 1998 p. 1). With the technological advances of the 1990s, peace education moved towards more tools like telecommunications (Johnson, 1998 p. 2). As Johnson (1998) writes, "school children around the globe are learning from and about each other while educators are planning lessons and developing professional relationships with their international counterparts" (p. 2). The work of Giroux (1993) and Christensen (2000) speak to the characteristics of peace education, emphasizing the importance to look to, learn from, and understand the many different cultures present in the world around them.

Giroux (1993) views literacy as a kind of "cultural citizenship" (p. 367). Literacy is the means to instilling in children everywhere, an acceptance of others different from themselves. Furthermore, Giroux (1993) speaks of being literate as being able to participate in "a dialogue with others who speak from different histories, locations, and experiences" (p. 367-368). Through literacy instruction, therefore, children can learn how to speak with other people from backgrounds different than their own. It is important for children to learn how to speak with others from differing backgrounds. According to Giroux (1993), "people read the world differently depending on class, gender, race, and politics" (p. 368). As a result, a literate child will be able to have an open dialogue with people of differing backgrounds about how their background effects how they view the world.

Giroux (1993) even goes so far as to define the function of school. As written by Giroux (1993), "the purpose and meaning of schooling extend beyond the function of a museum safeguarding the treasures of cultural tradition or the needs of the corporate state for more literate workers" (p. 372). Accordingly, students need to be educated to think to serve a greater purpose than as a worker or a body to continue on the traditions of a culture. Giroux (1993) goes on to say that, "educating students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for establishing relations between the self and others that refuse acts of violence, aggression, and subjugation" is of the greatest importance (p. 372).

The way to go about educating students to be more critical thinking, according to Giroux (1993), is through "providing students with the knowledge, capacities, and opportunities to be noisy irreverent, and vibrant" (p. 374). Also, pedagogy needs to be transformed in order to provide more opportunities for students to think critically (Giroux (1993). A critical pedagogy would enable educators to help create "a democratic society in which differences are affirmed and interrogated rather than dismissed as essentialist or disruptive" (Giroux, 1993 p. 373). Moreover, Giroux (1993) writes, "differences can be analyzed and constructed within pedagogical contexts that promote compassion and tolerance rather than envy, hatred, and bigotry" (p. 375). Giroux (1993) pushes for a "pedagogy of literacy," where students look to differences and examine them while at the same time cross barriers between differences in order to gain a better understanding (p. 376). Finally, Giroux (1993) states the potential of literacy in educating students, "literacy that both affirm and disrupts in the name of hope, committed to the radical possibility of politics and ethics that inform the struggle for a better future" (p. 377).

Christensen (2000) used real life experiences in the classroom to explore how literacy instruction could be used to create critical thinkers out of her students. Christensen (2000) put into practice what Giroux (1993) promoted, extending the purpose and meaning of school to more than just the "function of a museum safeguarding the treasures of cultural tradition or the needs of the corporate state for more literate workers" (p. 372). She emphasizes the importance of community, citing "to become a community, students must learn to live in someone else's skin, understand the parallels of hurt, struggle, and joy across class and culture lines, and work for change" (Christensen 2000 p. 2). Like Giroux (1993), Christensen (2000) understands the necessity in students taking different perspectives in order to better understand the world as well as each other. Whereas Giroux (1993) emphasized the need for a change in pedagogy, Christensen (2000) looks to a change in literacy instruction. Christensen (2000) explains that, "by writing interior monologues, acting out improvisations, taking part in role plays, by creating fiction stories about historical events, students learn to develop understanding about people whose culture, race, gender or sexual orientation differs from theirs" (p. 6). In addition to exploring the lives of others different from themselves, "students also learn by exploring their own lives" (Christensen 2000 p. 6). It is through this self-exploration and exploration of others that students become more open to the world, or as Giroux (1993) would call "barrier crossers" (p. 370).

Christensen (2000) used literacy to teach students to think critically. She writes, "to read for race, class, and gender biases in books, I tell students to look behind the words to discover what the text is really saying" (Christensen 2000 p. 37). When students look to what the words are actually saying, they are able to step away from their

background, as well as from the background of the authors, to truly understand what is being conveyed by the words in the text. Additionally, Christensen (2000) points out the importance of language in developing a critical mind in students because "language is about power" and "critical literacy is about 'reading' and uncovering power relationships in the world" (p. 106). Because language is power, literacy can be a powerful tool in teaching students to be agents of change.

Promoting an Environment to Support Change

Classroom instruction can be used to help promote an environment that supports change. A multitude theorists, practitioners and other authors emphasize the importance of instruction in creating critical thinking students. These writers include Stomfay-Stitz and Wheeler, Miller, Giroux, Christensen, Robinson and Curry, Ciardiello, McDaniel, and DeVoogd. These authors also provide a multitude of strategies, techniques, and methods to use in order to create an environment to support change.

"The Peaceful Classroom"

The peaceful classroom is imperative to promoting an environment to support change. If students feel threatened or unsafe in the classroom, then they are less likely to open themselves up to new ideas and thoughts. According to Miller (2005), "When children feel cherished and affirmed by others, especially the adults in their lives, they feel less of a need to prove their worth by putting others down" (p. 15). In order to create a peaceful classroom, several areas need to be addressed. These areas are language, kindness/altruism, and conflict resolution.

Language:

The language used in the classroom by the teacher as well as the language used in the texts read in the classroom can greatly affect the tone of the classroom. Language not only indicates who has the power, but it also helps to create a sense of community in the classroom. Also, students are able to use language to communicate with one another to work cooperatively discussing ideas as well as resolving conflicts that may occur in the classroom. Both Giroux (1993) and Christensen (2000) saw the value of language in regards to instruction in the classroom. Literacy, in Giroux's (1993) eyes, was an "emerging act of consciousness and resistance" (p. 367). Giroux (1993) also pushed for a new pedagogy to address literacy in students. The strategies used by Christensen (2000) to teach her students reflect Giroux's (1993) ideas. Christensen (2000) created "a community of inquiry" (p. 5) where students "identified a common problem and worked to understand it by examining history and our lives" (p. 5). Also, Christensen (2000) helped students find a connection between their own lives and the texts of the classroom, creating a "connection, this reverberation across cultures, time, and gender, challenged the students' previous notion that reading and talking about novels didn't have relevance for them" (p. 5). Christensen (2000) connected the language of the students to the language in the texts to help students explore the deeper meanings.

Stomfay-Stitz and Wheeler (2006) took a closer look at language in the classroom. They describe the role of language as "the caring, creative words that describe and enhance peace" (Stomfay-Stitz & Wheeler 2006 p. 292-F). In order to use language to its fullest potential, students must first learn to communicate (Stomfay-Stitz & Wheeler 2006 p. 292-F). Furthermore Stomfay-Stitz and Wheeler (2006) cited

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Developing Vocabulary and Understanding when identifying the importance of students

developing "their comprehension and application of the vocabulary for peace so they

could more accurately describe their own feelings and understand another child's choice

of words when they 'describe their own and the differing' feelings of others" (Stomfay-

Stitz & Wheeler 2006 p. 292-F).

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Kindness/Altruism:

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Kindness and altruism are important in creating a peaceful classroom. Students

need to be shown kindness by not only the teacher but the students as well, in order for

them to be comfortable enough to share in the classroom. Also, by promoting kindness,

conflicts could be reduced. Finally, the kindness students are shown and show can carry

outside of the classroom into other environments, thus making students agents of change.

Robinson and Curry (2005) explored the presence of altruism in classrooms. They define

altruism as "behavior motivated by concern for other or by internalized values, goals, and

self-reward rather than by the expectation of concrete or social rewards, or the desire to

avoid punishment or sanctions" (Robinson & Curry 2005 p. 68). Robinson and Curry

(2005) look to creating a classroom community as the first step "in promoting children's

internalization of values about helping altruism" (p. 71). Also, the authors provided

instructional techniques to use in order to help students think critically about altruistic

acts in literature. Robinson and Curry (2005) state:

> Another way to develop personal values and beliefs about helping others is to use
>
> group discussions about moral dilemmas. Many books and stories focus on
>
> characters with a moral dilemma. Students can brainstorm ways that characters in

the stories could have responded and what different outcomes would have resulted. (p. 72)

Through these instructional techniques students think critically about the text and create alternative solutions to problems posed. Finally, according to Robinson and Curry (2005):

If our students are going to behave in altruistic ways, we first must help them recognize what altruism is, increase their awareness of others' feelings, develop their own personal values and style for helping, and increase their knowledge of their own helping competences. (p. 73)

Wheeler and Stomfay-Stitz (2005) define *kindness* as "doing things for, motivated by a true sense of concern and not merely a sense of duty or obligation" (p. 292-I). In this sense, the definition of both *kindness* and *altruism* are very similar. Furthermore, they state that "kindness presupposes an effort toward perspective taking. The 'kind thing to do' is an important solution to disputes" (Wheeler & Stomfay-Stitz 2005 p. 292-I).

Global Citizens:

Miller (2005) writes:

Sowing the seeds for peace and justice in classrooms could nurture a new generation of world leaders and ordinary citizens who have a vision of a peaceful and just world, and who have both the will and skill to bring this vision to reality. (p. 14)

Miller (2005) acknowledges the opportunity to educate students so as to create adults who are global in their thinking. According to Miller (2005), "our learning communities can be viewed as microcosms of the positive society we envision" (p. 14). In making global citizens out of students, Miller (2005) writes that "A key goal is to strive to create a caring community of learners where diversity and children of all races, ethnic groups, socio-economic classes, religions, geographic regions, sexual orientations, and family structures feel both welcomed and affirmed in the classroom" (p. 15). This directly relates to the elements of the peaceful classroom previously discussed. The peaceful classroom is a caring one that respects all of the differences present in the classroom. Miller (2005) calls for the need to "develop classroom communities where affirmation and acceptance are the pattern, and rejection and exclusion have no place" (p. 15). In creating global citizens, Miller (2005) writes that "Students need to learn about the commonality of our lives and the diversity of our cultures" (p. 17). Miller's (2005) thoughts on creating global citizens out of students tie nicely with Giroux's (1993) thoughts on education. According to Giroux (1993), "the purpose and meaning of schooling extend beyond the function of a museum safeguarding the treasures of cultural tradition or the needs of the corporate state for more literate workers" (p. 372). Both Giroux (1993) and Miller (2005) see the importance in promoting an open-mind in students so that they are more excepting of others who are different as well as think critically about the world that surrounds them.

Cooperative Learning:

Cooperative learning provides students with a time to share their ideas and hear the ideas of others, talk through them, and gain new perspectives. Wheeler and Stomfay-

Stitz (2006) address the power of cooperative learning when discussing one teacher's strategy, "certain centers will have limited materials so that they can practice sharing" (p. 162-F). Students need to learn to work together first in order to then work to solve problems and look at different views of the world. With cooperative learning it is important, according to Christensen (2000), to "make students feel 'significant' in our classroom" (p. 18). Also, Wheeler and Stomfay-Stitz (2005) write that "Success in education depends not only on caring, but also on children believing themselves to be cared for" (Wheeler & Stomfay-Stitz 2005 p. 292-P).

Critical Literacy

Ciardiello (2004) provides "a model of critical literacy practices related to a social justice issue, and the issue is presented through the civic actions of relatively obscure young historical figures" (p. 138). Critical literacy is defined as "a set of literary practices and civic competencies that help the learner develop a critical awareness that texts represent particular points of view while often silencing other views" (Ciardiello 2004 p. 138). Ciardiello (2004) cites five practices to use in order to teach students to look beyond the text. The five practices discussed by Ciardiello (2004) are "examining multiple perspectives, finding one's authentic voice, recognizing social barriers and crossing borders of separation, regaining one's identity, and listening and responding to 'the call of service'" (p. 138). Ciardiello (2004) goes on to state that the purpose of these practices is to "help young students become critically competent and caring citizens" (p. 139). Ciardiello (2004) cites the importance of using texts that address real life historical figures because it "provides real models to help children understand the abstract concepts of literacy and democracy" (p. 140). Furthermore, Ciardiello (2004) cites that "young

learners can identify with the hopes and aspirations of historical figures their own age while critically investigating a social injustice" (p. 140). The importance of examining multiple perspectives lies in its ability to help "learners view text as ideologically constructed (Ciardiello 2004 p. 140). Ciardiello (2004) describes authentic voice as important because "students need to learn that any text they encounter in and out of school contains both dominant and silent voices" (p. 142). Ciardiello (2004) discusses the importance of "recognizing social barriers and crossing borders of separation" (p. 138) just as Giroux (1993) did. Ciardiello (2004) writes that "barriers and borders establish boundaries and foster exclusion – characteristics that are antithetical to literacy and democracy, which thrive on openness of ideas and freedom of movement" (p. 143). Ciardiello (2004) believes that by "crossing these borders of separation that cultural pluralism, the hallmark of democracy, can flourish" (p. 143).

DeVoogd (2006) writes that "a large part of what we believe and understand about the world comes from where and when we grew up" (p. 48). Moreover, DeVoogd (2006) discusses how filmmakers, authors, and journalists "carefully pick their own realities to persuade, entertain, or make a point" (p. 49). DeVoogd (2006) describes critical literacy as encouraging "readers to question an author's intentions and examine issues from multiple perspectives to avoid simplistic statements. It supports a more complex and nuanced understanding of events, recognizing social and political influences" (p. 49). Furthermore, DeVoogd (2006) writes that it is the teacher's job "to teach kids to ask serious questions about the authority of the words they read" (p. 51). Finally, DeVoogd (2006) depicts the purpose of critical literacy as creating "a more equitable, just world" (p. 52).

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McDaniel (2004) writes that critical literacy "encourages readers to adopt a questioning stance and to work toward changing themselves and their worlds" (p. 472). Furthermore, McDaniel (2004) emphasizes that critical literacy is "an overall philosophy rather than a set of techniques" (p. 472). McDaniel (2004) writes that "despite increased sensitivity to diversity, contemporary texts are not neutral" (p. 473). McDaniel (2004) cites Apol (1998) in discussing how adults influence what children read, "adults mediate most, if not all, of a child's reading, and that mediation is not disinterested; it is a way for adults to shape children, to promote for children a certain version of reality" (p. 473). This ties nicely to Giroux's (1993) definition of the purpose of schools, "the purpose and meaning of schooling extend beyond the function of a museum safeguarding the treasures of cultural tradition or the needs of the corporate state for more literate workers" (p. 372). Where McDaniel (2004) recognizes how adults shape children's minds, Giroux (1993) declares the need for this to change. McDaniel (2004) describes children in the United States as being "taught to not question the status quo and to accept and obey the voice of authority" (p. 473). According to Giroux (1993), students should be provided "with the knowledge, capacities, and opportunities to be noisy irreverent, and vibrant" (p. 374). This is the opposite of what McDaniel (2004) cites as the way students are taught. McDaniel (2004) refers to Shannon (1995) in defining critical literacy.

> Critical perspectives push the definition of literacy beyond traditional decoding or
> encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text or society until it
> becomes a means for understanding one's own history and culture, to recognize
> connections between one's life and social structure, to believe that change in
> one's life, and the lives of others and society are possible as well as desirable, and

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to act on this new knowledge in order to foster equal and just participation in all the decisions that affect and control our lives. (p. 474)

Giroux's (1993) call for students to be able to" undertake a dialogue with others who speak from different histories, locations, and experiences" (p. 367-368) relates to Shannon's (1995) definition in that both call for students to be able to reflect upon their own as well as other's culture. McDaniel (2004) discusses the importance of texts, stating that "children could benefit from texts that actually depict characters engaging in critical literacy – characters "reading" their worlds critically, questioning reality, transforming themselves, and initiating social change" (p. 479). Finally, McDaniel (2004) asserts that "ignoring critical literacy limits children's potential to become thoughtful, active citizens in a democracy, who can work toward transformation" (p. 480).

Chapter Three

Context and Design of the Study

<u>Introduction</u>

The purpose of this study is to examine how students perceive themselves as agents of change and how literacy instruction is used to support these perceptions. Therefore, a multitude of sources will be used in order to ascertain a general understanding of how literacy instruction may be used to effect students' perceptions of themselves as agents of change. A general class discussion on literature read in the classroom will be used to gain students' initial perception of themselves. Observations made in the researcher's journal will be used throughout the study to determine if and how literacy instruction is effecting the students' perceptions. Student writing will be used to determine how the students' perceptions of themselves progress over the course of the study. Finally, class discussions will be used to ascertain if students are able to think critically to solve a problem based on them being agents of change. The study occurred during a one month time period during the spring of the 2006-2007 school year. The study was conducted in the classroom I completed my student teaching in.

Community

The LNS School is located in Santua Township, New Jersey. Santua Township is located in the Philadelphia-Metro area. As of the 2000 U.S. Census, Santua had a population of approximately 15,000 people. About 95% of the population is Caucasian and 2% of the population is African American. The remainder of the population is split between

American Indian/Alaskan Native (0.2%), Asian (0.9%), some other race (0.3%), two or more races (0.8%), and Hispanic or Latino (1.39%). The median household income in Santua Township is $58,256. Approximately 16.8% of residents aged 25 and older have a bachelor's degree, while about 25.9% of residents aged 25 and older have an associate's degree or some other college education.

School District

The LNS School is one of three schools in the Santua Township School District. The other two schools in the district are the Middle City Elementary School and the Well School. The Middle City Elementary School houses students in grades kindergarten through fourth grade. Additionally, the Middle City Elementary School has a special needs preschool program. The Well School houses students in grades kindergarten through fourth grade. Both the Middle City Elementary School and the Well School send their fifth and sixth grade students to the LNS School, which houses students from grades pre-kindergarten through sixth grade.

School

For the 2005-2006 school year, the LNS School had a population of 636 students. The school houses grades pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the number of classes and students in each grade. For fifth and sixth grades, students from the Middle City School and Well School attend the LNS School. The majority of the school population is made up of fifth and sixth grade students, with nine and eight classes, respectively. According to the New Jersey Department of Education web site, the average class size at the LNS School is approximately nineteen students. As of the 2005-2006 school year, the faculty to student ratio is 10.9. All

classrooms in the school have access to the Internet and have at least one computer. One hundred percent of the students speak English as their first language at home. In addition, the school has an average attendance rate of 95.9 percent for students. In terms of teachers' education, approximately 62.5 percent of the teachers have a bachelor's degree while about 37.5 percent of the teachers have a master's degree.

Table 1: Number of Classes and Students per Grade Level

Grade	Number of Classes	Number of Students
Pre-K	1	13
K	2	38
1st	2	53
2nd	2	38
3rd	2	46
4th	2	40
5th	9	165
6th	8	223
Special Ed. (ungraded)	2	19
Total Population	26	636

Classroom and Participants

This study was completed in a fifth grade inclusion classroom. There were 23 students in the classroom. The students in this classroom varied in ability level. Table 2 shows the breakdown of students in the classroom. In this fifth grade class, six students had Individualized Education Plans (IEP) developed to meet their individual education needs. There was one regular education teacher and one classroom aide in the classroom. The classroom aide worked with those students with an IEP to ensure that they were

keeping up with the rest of the class. One of the students with an IEP was pulled out of the classroom for replacement instruction for literacy and math in the resource room. Another student with an IEP receives replacement instruction for literacy in the resource room but returns to the regular education classroom for math instruction. Finally the remaining three students with IEP's remain in the regular education classroom fro literacy but receive replacement instruction in the resource room for math. Four students in the class participated in the school's enrichment program with students from three other fifth grade classes. The sixth student with an IEP was one of the students who participated in the school's enrichment program. This student's IEP was developed to address the student's needs as he was classified as emotionally disturbed. This classroom was not ethnically diverse. All of the students in the classroom were Caucasian. Furthermore, none of the students received free or reduced lunch. The students in this classroom came from middle to upper middle class families.

All of the students in the classroom were given the opportunity to participate in the study. The two students who received literacy instruction in the resource room did not participate in this study because they were not present in the classroom during the times that data was collected for this study. Furthermore, it was decided that they would not participate in the study because the classroom and special education teacher felt that it would interfere with their work in the resource room. Twenty one students participated in this study. The three students with IEP's who received math instruction in the resource room as well as the four students in the school's enrichment program participated in this study. Of all the students participating in the study, 100% were Caucasian.

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Table 2: Participants

Student #	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Ability
1	11	Female	Caucasian	
2	10	Female	Caucasian	
3	10	Female	Caucasian	
4	10	Male	Caucasian	
5	11	Male	Caucasian	Enrichment
6	11	Female	Caucasian	Enrichment
7	10	Male	Caucasian	RR Math
8	10	Male	Caucasian	
9	11	Male	Caucasian	
10	10	Male	Caucasian	
11	11	Female	Caucasian	RR Math
12	11	Male	Caucasian	
13	11	Male	Caucasian	Enrichment
14	10	Male	Caucasian	
15	10	Male	Caucasian	
16	11	Male	Caucasian	
17	10	Female	Caucasian	
18	11	Female	Caucasian	RR Math
19	11	Female	Caucasian	Enrichment
20	11	Female	Caucasian	
21	10	Male	Caucasian	
22*	10	Female	Caucasian	RR Literacy
23*	11	Female	Caucasian	RR Literacy & Math

*Students did not participate in study

Literacy instruction in this classroom was scheduled for 80 minutes of instruction every morning. This time period was further subdivided into three subject areas. These three subject areas were reading, grammar, and spelling. Each of these subject areas were approximately 25 minutes in length. Moreover, there was a 30 minute period after lunch every day for additional literacy instruction. During this period three different

activities were completed on different days. The first activity used was called *Drop Everything and Read* (DEAR). During this activity, everyone in the classroom would spend the 30 minute period reading a book of their choice. The second activity used during this period was journal writing. Students were given a journal prompt, were able to choose a story starter card, or free write during this time. The third activity completed during this period was a literature circle. Students were divided into small groups and would meet twice a week to discuss what they had read.

Description of General Methodology

In order to collect valuable and reliable data, I used a qualitative research design. Observations made in the researcher's journal, student writing, and class discussions will be the primary data sources used in conducting my research. The students in the classroom will be the most important source of data for this study. Their answers to journal prompts, class discussions, and behavior during observations will be invaluable to my study.

Data Sources

Data was collected from several sources. First, a class discussion was used to gain students' initial perceptions of themselves as agents of change. Second, informal observations of students during class discussions were used throughout the study to determine if and how literacy instruction is effecting the students' perceptions of themselves. Third, student writing will be used to determine if and how the students progress over the course of the study. Finally, class discussions were used to determine if students are able to think critically to solve a problem.

Data Analysis

After collecting the aforementioned data sources, I examined the different sources to identify if there are any recurrent themes present. These themes could provide me with a deeper understanding of if and how literacy instruction can be used to impact students' perceptions of themselves as agents of change. The observations, student writing, and class discussions were used to see any growth students may have had over the course of this study.

The data collected throughout this study will remain confidential. All participants in the study will receive a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher will be the only person with access to the data collected.

Chapter Four

Results of Study

Literacy instruction can be used to help students gain information about a wide spectrum of topics. Furthermore, literacy instruction may be used to help motivate students to be agents of change in the community they live in. The purpose of this study was to see how literacy instruction can be used to help students think of themselves as agents of change. In this study, journal prompts and class discussions of literature read will be used to determine how literacy instruction can be used to increase students' perception of themselves as agents of change.

In this chapter I discuss the results of the journal prompts and class discussion that took place in the classroom. I analyze the students' responses to evaluate if and how the students' perceptions of themselves as agents of changed over the course of the study. The responses given by the students during the class discussion will also be discussed. Tables 3 and 4 represent the students' responses to the journal prompts.

At the beginning of this study, the students in the class were reading excerpts from the book It's Our World Too by Phillip Hoose (1993). The excerpts read told the real life stories of two children and the actions they took to help out members of their community. Both of the children in the excerpts were around the same age as the students in the class. The first excerpt the students read was about a young boy that built bicycles for needy children. The second excerpt was about a young girl that organized the help of family and friends to make meals for homeless people living in her

community. After the students had finished reading the two excerpts, I asked them a simple question:

These two children are around the same age as you. Are you capable of doing something to help your community like they did?

The responses I received were overwhelmingly negative.

"I can't build bikes."

"No way!"

"I don't' have any money to buy all that stuff for bikes."

"All my friends have bikes. There's nobody to build the bikes for."

"There aren't any homeless people in Santua. We would have to go find them to give them a sandwich."

"My mom makes me lunch, I don't know how."

These types of responses lasted for several minutes. I decided that I needed to rephrase my question in order to get the students to think a little more about what they could do to help their community. I asked the students to think outside of what the two children from the excerpts had done. I wanted them to think of things that they could do that other people could not. The response I received from the students was a sea of blank stares. The students were unable to think of anything they could do to help the community they lived in.

To try to salvage the discussion, I asked the students why they thought the two children from the excerpts decided to help those less fortunate than themselves. The students had a difficult time understanding, or even explaining, why the two children had helped those less fortunate than themselves. Finally, one student raised her hand and

said, "Maybe it made them feel good to help out those people." The rest of the students in the class quickly agreed with her response.

This initial class discussion did not give me too much hope for the success of my study. As written in my researcher's journal:

Today I tried to get the students to think about ways they could help their community. It was hopeless. Not one of them gave me an answer. I'm surprised that they couldn't even give me an answer as simple as cleaning up the trash around town. Also, I'm surprised that they couldn't tell me why the two characters would want to help others, even though it was mentioned in the story. All I could get out of any of them was "maybe it made them feel good." I hope that by the end of the study, these students will be able to at least identify ways they can help their community."

In analyzing the data collected throughout the study, I looked to those activities that provided the most telling insights into the students' perceptions of themselves as agents of change. The responses provided by the students to these activities show how the students' perceptions of themselves changed from the beginning of the study to the conclusion of the study.

<div align="center">Activity #1: Two-Part Journal Prompt</div>

Part 1

During the first week of the study, students were given the following journal prompt:

If you could change one thing about the world to make it a better place, what would you change?

Students were given twenty five minutes to respond to the journal prompt. At the end of the twenty five minutes, several students chose to share their responses with the rest of the class.

The students' responses to the journal prompt had two main themes: peace/reducing violence and pollution. Table 3 represents the breakdown of student responses to the journal prompt.

As seen in Table 3, the majority of responses dealt with world peace and reducing violence around the world. Ten out of the twenty one students cited one of these two changes they would make in the world. Of these ten students, four students wrote that they would stop all wars. The remaining six students wrote that the one thing they would do would be to end all violence.

For those students that chose to stop all of the wars, the reasoning was very similar. Student 16 wrote about ending wars, "If that could change people wouldn't have to worry about their loved ones being killed or wonder if they're going to come back home." This sentiment was shared by the three other students. Many students suggested that wars and other forms of violence should stop because of the innocent people that were hurt from it. Moreover, Student 20 expressed an interesting position on wars. Student 14 wrote, "People are always getting hurt by dangerous and bad weapons." These responses show an ability for the students to relate to those people affected by war. The students are able to identify and sympathize with the feelings of those affected by war.

The remaining six students who cited violence as the one thing they would change focused on fighting and criminals. These students felt that it was important to change these two things because it was usually innocent people who were hurt the most by

fighting and criminal behavior. Student 2 wrote, "If I could change one thing about the world to make it a better place it would be the criminals. The reason for this is because being a criminal is a horrible thing and people who are so nice and care for each other/everything don't deserve to have horrible things done to them." This statement is representative of the other students' feelings on criminals and fighting. The responses made by these students focus on the harming of innocent people by bad things like guns, wars, and criminals. In my researcher's journal, I noted the change in thinking among these ten students:

> *It is amazing how these students can explain how violence and war are harmful to people. They even show a developing understanding of the harm it causes to innocent people. What has happened since reading and discussing It's Our World Too that has changed their thinking? I think that reading the story of Rosa Parks has helped them understand how actions can be harmful to groups of people.*

Eight out of the twenty one students cited reducing pollution as the one thing that they would change to make the world a better place. Student 13 expressed a very sophisticated reason for wanting to reduce pollution, writing, "We need to have an advanced environmental-safe world to save lives, trees, and animals. Scientists need money so that they can make machines that will help make our world cleaner." Another student, Student 12, wrote that it was necessary to "work together to stop things like global warming, loss of habitat in the rainforest, and pollution." Both of these students expressed concern over pollution on a global scale. However, the remaining six students who cited pollution as the one thing they would change focused more on remedying local

pollution. Student 1 wrote "The one thing I would change would be littering because, I don't think it is fair that little kids either can't play outside at all (because of the litter) or they have to play in the litter (which they could get sick from)." All six students expressed the need to clean up their community.

Table 3: Results from Part 1 of the Journal Prompt

	Change		
Student #	Pollution	Peace/Reducing Violence	Off Topic
1	X		
2		X	
3	X		
4		X	
5	X		
6			X
7	X		
8		X	
9		X	
10			X
11		X	
12	X		
13	X		
14		X	
15	X		
16		X	
17		X	
18			X
19	X		
20		X	
21		X	

Three of the twenty one students participating in the study had responses to the journal prompt that were off topic. These students' responses did not address the topic. Instead, these students wrote about wanting to be older, wishing it was summer all of the time, and never having homework.

Part 2

The second part of the journal prompt was given during the middle of the study. Students were asked to respond to the following prompt:

Think back to the one thing you wanted to change in the world to make it a better place. What can you, and other children your age, do to make this change happen?

Once again, the students were given twenty five minutes to write their responses. At the end of the twenty five minutes, students were given the opportunity to share what they had written. The three students who wrote responses that were off topic for the first part of the journal prompt were also off topic for the second part of the journal prompt. These three students' responses will not be included in the analysis because they were off topic. Table 4 shows the breakdown of students' responses to the journal prompts.

Eight of the eighteen remaining students expressed that there was nothing they could do at their age to make their changes happen. For the first journal prompt, these students were the students that wanted to have more peace in the world and less violence.

Student Response:

Student 16: *"Actually I really don't think that anybody really can make this change."*

Student 9: *"I don't think people around my age could do anything yet because we aren't old enough. I don't think we could do anything yet because we don't have our driver's license."*

Student 8: *"We would not be able to get gangs off the streets because we are too young to listen to and they don't want to get off the streets unless it's illegal to get off, but they will just ignore us because we are too young."*

Eight of the remaining ten students felt that they could make their change happen. For the first journal prompt, these students were the students that wanted to reduce pollution. In fact, all eight of these students provided suggestions on ways that they and others their age could help to make change happen. Age did not play a factor in any of the responses made by these eight students.

Table 4: Results from Part 2 of the Journal Prompt

Student #	Change			Possibility of Change	
	Pollution	Peace/Reducing Violence	Off Topic	Possible	Not Possible
1	X			X	
2		X		X	X
3	X			X	
4		X			X
5	X			X	
6			X		
7	X			X	
8		X		X	X
9		X			X
10			X		
11		X			X
12	X			X	
13	X			X	
14		X			X
15	X			X	
16		X			X
17		X			X
18			X		
19	X			X	
20		X			X
21		X			X

One student in particular was very optimistic in the ability of fifth graders to help reduce pollution. Student 13 wrote:

"Anyone could pitch it, especially 5th graders. We could raise thousands a year and be able to create a better community, town, county, state, country, continent, and world. We could have bake sales, lemonade sales, garage sales, and even sell cheap tickets to see performances. We could do any kind of sale to help."

The remaining two students expressed in their responses that they both could and could not make their change happen. Both of these students wrote that they wanted to reduce violence and wars for the first journal prompt. Like the group of students who wrote that change was not possible at their age, these two students felt that being eleven years old prevented them from making any real change. However, these two students did provide several ways that they could try to make their change happen. These two students felt that they could try to make change happen by getting the help of adults, especially those adults involved in the government.

Student 14 wrote, "I couldn't do much. The cops can. They can make laws to make guns illegal. I could write them a letter to tell them why I want guns to be illegal. But I can't make them make the laws."

Student 20 wrote about her thoughts on stopping all wars, "The only problem is that 11 year olds can't do much about that. But what we can try to do is write a letter to the governor or president and maybe get some information about all of these wars going on."

Both Student 14 and Student 20 doubt their ability be major forces of change at eleven years old. However, both students identified what they could do to try to make change happen.

Activity #2: Class Discussion

At the conclusion of the study, the students participated in a class discussion. The students were split into two groups based on their responses to the first part of the journal prompt. Those students that identified peace/reducing violence as the change they would make were placed in Group 1. Those students that identified pollution as the change they would make were placed in Group 2. The two groups were then given the following scenario to guide the discussion:

You have found a genie that will grant your group 1 wish. The group decides to wish for the change you wrote about (peace/reducing violence or pollution). However, before the genie grants the wish, you must convince a group of fifth graders from around the world that your group's change is the best change to make the world a better place.

- *What reasons do you have to help convince the group of students to agree with your change?*

- *Are there other changes that could be made that the group of students will think are more important?*

The students were given fifteen minutes to discuss the scenario and outline their responses. Each group then presented their answers to the rest of the class.

Group 1

The students in group one used the same reasons for change as in their journal prompt responses. The students expressed the need to end wars and reduce crime in order to protect the innocent people who were affected by wars and crime. Once again, the students in this group showed an ability to identify and explain the feelings of other people. Furthermore, the students in Group 1 did think that the group of students from

around the world would probably want to make a different change. When asked why that would be, one Student 17 said, "We thought that they probably would make a different change because they are different than us. They think different because they are not Americans." This response shows an superficial understanding that people from different places around the world think differently than people from other places in the world. The students in Group 1, however, were unable to name any changes that the group of students from around the world would want to change.

Group 2

The students in Group 2, like Group 1, used the same reasons from their journal responses to support their change. The students in Group 2 felt strongly that the group of students from around the world would want to make a different change. Student 19 said, "Kids from Iraq don't care about pollution because of all of the fighting around them. We think that they want to end all wars so that they don't get killed from all the fighting. It's more important to them than a piece of trash." I was astounded by this response. Group 2 had not only identified that some students from around the world would not want to make the same change but were also able to identify why they would not want to make the same change and what change they would want to make. I later wrote in my researcher's journal:

I think that some of the kids got it. Group 2 was dead on in their response. It was great to see that they were able to think outside of their world. Also, I was pleased to see that the students in Group 1 were able to identify that other people might not want to make the same change. However, the students in Group 1 were not able to take their

thinking one step further like the students in Group 2 and come up with another change

the group of students from around the world would want to make.

The students' responses during the discussion of It's Our World Too by Philip Hoose (1993) did not inspire any confidence in their ability to think of themselves as agents of change. Furthermore, their responses showed that they were unable to take on the perspective of the characters in the excerpts to explain why they would want to help others.

The students' responses to the journal prompts marked a change in thinking from the discussion of the two characters from the excerpts. The students were able to identify what they would change about the world and why they would make that change. In fact, some students were able to relate the feelings that others may have in regards to the changes they would make. Moreover, ten of the twenty one participants were able to suggest different ways to make the changes happen. This showed an awareness of their ability to be agents of change as well as the ability of other children their age. Finally, the students' group discussions and presentations show growth from the first class discussion. The students were able to support reasons for their change. But more importantly, they were able to identify that others may have a different opinion than their own on the changes that need to be made in order to make the world a better place.

Chapter Five

Summary and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine how literacy instruction could be used in order to help students to think of themselves as agents of change. I found that literacy instruction can be used to help students think of themselves as agents of change. The results found in this study suggest answers to the research questions posed in Chapter 1. First, my research indicates that students do have the ability to think of themselves as agents of change. Secondly, student responses to journal prompts and class discussions provide insight into how students perceive themselves as agents of change.

There have been several limitations during the course of this study that have prevented the research from being more relevant. Firstly, the time allotted for this study was not adequate. Time to conduct the research was very limited due to the schedule of the classroom in which the data was collected. Secondly, the study was limited by the homogenous make up of the participants. The participants in this study were all Caucasian and came from middle to upper middle class homes. Thirdly, this study had to rely on literature already read by the students due to the time constraints. Finally, the results of this study may only be generalized to this group of students.

The results of this study show that literacy instruction can be used to increase students' thinking of themselves as agents of change. The responses given by students to the journal prompts and class discussions show some growth from the beginning of the end of the study. By the end of the study, students were able to think of themselves as

capable of making change. Furthermore, the results of the study show students as having the ability to look to the perspective of others. According to the responses during the final class discussion, students showed an understanding that people from other parts of the world may have differing opinions than their own. Furthermore, students are much more likely to think of themselves as agents of change if the change is community related. The participants of this study that wanted to make a change related to their community and environment were more positive in their thinking of themselves as agents of change. However, the limitations of this study have prevented me from studying the true effect literacy instruction can have on students' perceptions of themselves as agents of change.

Implications for Teaching

What implications does this study and results have for fifth grade teachers in this area? This research shows that students are capable of thinking critically about the world in which they live. Moreover, students are capable of thinking of themselves as agents of change. The results of this study show that students are capable of thinking critically as well. Fifth grade teachers should look to this study and its results to show the importance of choosing literature that will promote students to think critically. Furthermore, students need to be given the opportunities and forums to openly discuss the world they live in.

Recommendations for Future Research

In future research more literature based on real life characters should be used in order to encourage students to think of themselves as agents of change. As Ciardiello (2004) notes, real life historical figures "provide real models to help children understand the abstract concepts of literacy and democracy" (p. 140). Furthermore, future research

should examine what happens when students perceive themselves as agents of change. Future researchers may wish to examine how students' thinking changes when they perceive themselves as agents of change. Finally, future research should ultimately try to answer the following question:

Are students, who view themselves as agents of change, able to become facilitators of change?

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