

Analysis of Freedom Writers: Sociological Imagination

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In the film *Freedom Writers*, the concept of the sociological imagination can be used to analyze the circumstances of each character in the film. The idea of sociological imagination implies that people are able to step outside from their own personal norms, and examine a situation from a new or different perspective. The way Erin Gruwell helps her students use their sociological imagination, is by helping them to see how the problems they believe to be personal troubles might in fact be public issues. Erin also tries to help the faculty and staff at Woodrow Wilson High School, see that these student's problems are not problems that have necessarily been brought on themselves. She wants the school's administration to see how they have contributed to making these students personal problems into public issues.

Each of the students in Ms. Gruwell class faces their own personal troubles; Eva Benitez is a Hispanic teen involved in a gang and constantly feels her life is in danger. Eva feels like she doesn't have a choice but to be involved in gang life, partially because of her economic status. Her father was involved in gang activity as well, and she was introduced to the gang mentality at a young age. Eventually Eva's father was arrested; he instilled in her the idea of separation of races and protecting their own at any cost. This idea is tested when Eva witnesses a murder committed by her boyfriend at a local convenient store. A young African American teen is also in the convenient store when the murder takes place and is blamed for the murder. Eva is confronted with the task of deciding whether or not to do the right thing and tell the truth or, lie to protect her own

In class the students are assigned to read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. This particular story resonates with Eva and she becomes enthralled by the book. When she gets to the end of the book, she feels frustrated by the ending. In a way the book had been giving her hope; hope that it is possible to escape from a lifestyle you don't want. When Anne is killed, Eva could not

understand how this book pertained to her in any way. Another one of Eva's class mates Marcus, points out that even though she dies the stories not over. This story is not just about a young girl dying, he tells her to look beyond that and see the effect a book like this can have on society. By reading this book the students are shown how to look at their own lives and realize their circumstances and not finite, they can determine their own futures.

After the class finished reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*, they were assigned to write Miep Gies, (the woman that helped hide Anne and her family) letters expressing their feelings about the book and what she did. The class sends her the letters and then decides to raise money in order to fly Miep Gies to their school. This is evidence that Erin had begun to change her student's way of thinking. They now knew that if they set goals for themselves and worked hard, they would be able to achieve their goals; even if they are faced with opposition or their goals seem impossible. When Miep Gies spoke with the students she explains how she is no hero; even though she faced death she did what she did, because it was just the right thing to do. Hearing this struck a cord with Eva, and made her re-evaluate how she would testify about the murder. Eva initially thought she would take this as an opportunity to claim a small victory for her turf, and allow the African American boy go to jail for murder.

Another student that was greatly affected by Miep Gies, was Andrea. He saw Miep Gies actions as heroic, and looked at her as a role model. Andrea was a teen that had seen a lot of death at a young age. He was also involved in gang activity; as a result he was kicked out of his house and lived in the streets. His rough lifestyle turned him into a cold person, filled with hate like many of his classmates. All of the students saw themselves as being very different from one another and never had any intentions of commingling with students of different races. One of the

ways Erin showed her students they were not so different was when she asked them different questions pertaining to their lives, and asked them to come to the line if it were true. Many of the teens were surprised to see, even though they thought they could not relate to each other, they were all just alike in many ways.

When the class was taken to the Museum about the Holocaust they were given a visual of what hate can do. This tour assigned each student with a person that was a victim during Holocaust; the students were able to see how another person's hatred affected someone's life. They saw that many of the victims did not survive and were killed simply because of their race. This drew a parallel for the students to see how their hatred and violence against each other was senseless. In the same way Hitler killed Jews because of their race, they were killing each other.

One of the biggest obstacles that Erin Gruwell faced in helping her students was the school it's self. She came into that school with the intentions of seeing the integration program as a positive force, that would give students opportunities that might not other wise have been afforded. The staff at this school did not think the same way; this program was only hurting their school and taking away opportunities from other students. The teachers and staff went into this situation assuming a negative outcome.

The students were not even given a chance to succeed if they wanted to. Students that were not honor students did not even receive textbooks for fear they would destroy them. This sent out a message to the student that the staff did not want them there, and the school essentially was a babysitting facility for teens. The troubles these teens faced at home were being used against them, to make them feel like they were less than the student from other racial backgrounds. They were being judged and discriminated against all because of their race and economical status. These students were expected to fail, if they succeeded it was unexpected and

pointed out as being unusual. One of the students, Victoria who was African American and placed in the honors classes commented to a staff member how she initially had been told she should be in a class with her own kind. When she was admitted to the honors classes, the teachers pointed out that it was unusual to see an African American student in an honors class, and she would be able to provide the “black prospective” on some of the material covered in class.

Erin wanted to change this mentality, so against staff’s approval she bought the students books to read with her own money. This was a way of showing the students she had faith in them, and she respected them enough to give them brand new books; these books not only related to their lives but were also challenging.

Erin was able to help her students learn how to overcome the struggles in their lives, and not allow these obstacles define who they were. Her creative use of books, fieldtrips and classroom interaction, changed the lives of many young individuals. She provided hope and helped these teens, that barely expected to finish their freshmen year, graduate high school feeling accomplished and inspired to continue their education. By teaching them to look beyond what was right in front of them and to realize the struggles that faced could be over come. They were given the tools to shape and create their own futures, and not to allow the stigmas placed upon them determine who they were destined to become.

References

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