

My name is Wendy Lane Smith and I am a fifth grade teacher in the Red Lion Area School District in Red Lion, Pennsylvania. When I first heard about this learning opportunity with the NEH and the Holocaust and Genocide Institute at Penn State, I did not think I should apply because the Holocaust is not a part of my fifth grade curriculum. Nonetheless, my mind continued to return to the thought of studying how to present such an important topic to the young people with whom I share my days. I couldn't seem to let it go. I found myself continually thinking about how many of today's fifth graders don't even know what the Holocaust is. In my school district, I don't think the students even learn about the Holocaust until at least 8th grade. That seems late to me. Having taught at our junior high in the past, I have also noticed that many students have little interest or concern for history. Maybe if they were exposed at a slightly younger age and had schema about the Holocaust, then they would have more interest. I honestly don't know, but I think it is worthy of consideration. I found myself thinking about Holocaust deniers and how that would not have occurred when I was a young learner. I realized I was pushing myself to find ways to expose my students to information about the Holocaust and other world changing events. Soon, I found myself trying to figure out how to create a space to approach this difficult topic within the walls of my classroom.

I teach reading, writing, and social studies to fifth graders and while I saw that the application grades 6-12, I still wanted to be considered because I feel I have a great deal to learn and a great deal to offer others. In my school district, the current social studies curriculum only focuses on Westward Expansion, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. These are also worthy topics and I have been learning how to use an inquiry approach to help my students draw their own conclusions about them, based on historical fact. We have been learning together to consider multiple perspectives on historical events. We have also been learning how to have respectful conversations about different interpretations of history.

As a second year member of the Teaching Difficult Topics cohort at Red Lion, I have been changed (hopefully for the better) by learning more about the inquiry process and how it increases engagement, authenticity of learning, and independent analysis of facts. I find myself looking for ways to raise the bar and help my learners reach their potential as thinkers. I often see applications for inquiry in areas other than academic instruction. I find that this process is very helpful in sorting out social issues among classmates as well as sparking curiosity and learner engagement. And now, I find myself considering how I can utilize this knowledge as a part of language arts instruction.

My most compelling reason for wanting to attend this institute is because I want to continue growing, learning, and challenging my own thinking. I want to learn more about how I can coach, guide, and learn alongside my class. I want to stay relevant as a teacher. As I have participated in Teaching Difficult Topics, I have experienced a surge in my motivation. This is so encouraging because I have observed so much teacher burnout and frustration in the years

since the beginning of the pandemic. Teaching is different these days, and some aspects of being a teacher have become much more difficult. By trying new things, I have regained enthusiasm, instead of burning out. Attending this institute feels like an extension of this wave and I want to ride it for as long as I can.

I have been exploring ways to integrate the Holocaust and other human rights issues into my reading workshop. In fifth grade we typically begin the school year with a fiction reading unit. We participate in book clubs as well as engage in activities surrounding an excellent mentor text. I realized that if I find a variety of historical fiction books about the Holocaust I can introduce my students to things they have not learned before. I could easily curate my collection of book club books to focus on themes like the Holocaust, the Civil Rights Movement, Immigration, the Civil War, or other similarly rich topics. I think these explorations will also provide opportunities for cultivating empathy and other pro-social skills. Once we get to our nonfiction units and our research based essays, the students can continue this work.

My participation would afford me the ability to better plan for and implement a sound framework to incorporate history that fifth graders might not otherwise learn about until they are in junior high or high school. Of course, I am certain that my own education about the Holocaust is also incomplete and I will benefit from learning more, both as a teacher and as a human being. Being able to have the time in the summer to immerse myself in the learning with other curious educators promises to be a growth experience.

I have many questions that I would like to explore; some pragmatic and some more philosophical in nature. The first thing I would like to learn is the types of resources and specific literature that I can use with my students. I have some ideas but I would like to know more about well respected literature at a variety of reading levels for elementary students.

How is the Holocaust taught to intermediate students? They are very impressionable and, in my experience, also very emotionally variable. Are there gentle ways to approach this topic without diminishing the shock and horror of the facts? Is fiction an appropriate way to introduce this? I see possibilities for highlighting the helpers, the dreamers, the stories of those who spoke out and fought against evil. My sense is that learning about a hard topic through the use of historical fiction might be a good entry point. Fifth graders seem to easily love the heroes and heroines of literature and they relate well to those who have struggled and overcome. Does this present an overall view of the Holocaust? Of course not, but it would be a starting point. Creating an interest and showing young people that they can learn, discuss, and have their own opinions on hard subject matter should be empowering? What is a preferred or age-appropriate way to introduce such a dark and sad reality to young people? I hope to find out.

I am also interested in how I might personalize this type of learning. I have observed that in the past few years, the range of reading ability and skills within a given grade level class is getting broader and broader. The background knowledge of our students is highly variable and I am curious as to how to establish the groundwork that will help all students find a starting point for this course of study. I am curious as to language and terminology that might be important. What are the best practices for Holocaust education?

Finally, I do and always will question whether or not I have the skills to facilitate this important learning. I know that this experience will be both emotionally draining and rewarding. I find myself asking if I am the right person to take this on. I also find myself asking, "If not me, then who?"

I hope you will consider me for a spot at this institute and I appreciate the opportunity to apply.