Many students first study the Holocaust in middle school, with The Diary of Anne Frank (Frank, 1952) being their most frequent initial contact with the event (Culbertson, 2001). As such, students often view Anne’s experiences as the story of the Holocaust, a perspective that frequently continues into the high school years and beyond (Lindquist, 2009). While the diary continues to generate much interest in the Shoah and remains an icon of Holocaust literature, its use as the focus of an introductory unit on the topic represents a marginally effective approach because of what it fails to do.1

Culbertson (2001) supports this view, holding that the diary provides a skewed view of the Holocaust because it does not present a realistic picture of what occurred during the event. No Nazis are portrayed, no brutalities are endured, and what happened to the people from the Secret Annex after their arrest in August, 1944, is not depicted. As a result, students who first confront the event through the diary fail to develop an accurate sense of either the Holocaust’s historical context or what happened to individuals as the Shoah evolved. The fact that most middle school use of the diary is based on excerpts published in anthologies extends this issue because the limited view of the Holocaust that emerges from reading the complete work is narrowed further when students read short segments that have been selected by editors who may not understand the event’s complexity or historicity.

This article discusses several critical factors involved in middle-level teaching of the Holocaust, including concerns about developmental appropriateness and historical accuracy, the process of historical conceptualization, and teaching about the Holocaust in middle-level language arts classrooms. It then considers the world of Holocaust literature in general before proposing that the novella Friedrich (Richter, 1970) provides an effective alternative to The Diary of Anne Frank as a vehicle through which middle-level students can be introduced to Holocaust history and literature.

**Factors to Consider in Middle-Level Teaching of the Holocaust**

Given this situation, middle-level language arts teachers should determine alternative ways to introduce the Holocaust to their students. In doing so, they should consider such factors as developmental appropriateness, the historical accuracy of materials that are used, the lack of experience that middle-level students have in considering complex historical events, and constraints that affect the teaching of the Shoah in the language arts setting.

**Concerns about Developmental Appropriateness**

Culbertson (2001) proposes that a balance between historical authenticity and the need to
observe students’ maturity levels must be developed when the Holocaust is presented to middle-level pupils, noting that:

If one’s students are too young to hear about or see the camps, then they are too young to learn about the Holocaust. ... Do not misinterpret what I am saying here. I am in no way endorsing an intense study of the death camps, nor am I asking teachers to feed into the kind of morbid fascination that preadolescents often have for blood or gore. What I am saying is that unless the realities can be addressed, students cannot understand how the Holocaust differs from any other prejudice-motivated mass action. (pp. 65-66)

Thus, teachers must determine if their students are prepared intellectually and emotionally to engage in an authentic study of the Shoah. If the answer is no, those students will be better served by not studying the Holocaust instead of considering it ahistorically.

Once a teacher has decided that studying the Shoah is appropriate for a given teaching situation, decisions must be made regarding what materials should be used and which pedagogies should be employed. For example, the tendency to use (or overuse) graphic materials (e.g., photographs and films taken during the liberation of the camps) should be avoided because Holocaust curricula should be designed to draw students to the subject through meaningful study and not through approaches that may result in a prurient, shock-value fascination with the topic on one hand (Lindquist, 2009) or that may diminish students’ interest in the subject on the other (Totten, 2001). Similarly, using questionable methodologies such as simulations in Holocaust education generates critical problems that detract from students’ learning about the event in ways that are academically and historically valid (Totten, 2002).

Concerns about Historical Accuracy

Shawn (2001) states that “A good book [of historical fiction] is rooted in historical context and reflects historical reality” (p. 145). She continues by identifying several works of historical fiction that are frequently used to teach about the Shoah in the middle grades, noting that each book contains critical factual errors. Similarly, other stories provide ambiguous explanations for what is being described. As a result, students who read these books are left to wonder what happened and, more importantly, why it happened. Therefore, teachers must select stories that depict the Holocaust “with the highest degree of accuracy, presenting authentic feelings, dilemmas, and experiences using language realistic to the period” (p. 141).

Middle-Level Students and the Process of Historical Conceptualization

Middle-level students mature intellectually as their thinking moves from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage in which abstract, logical reasoning and concerns about personal identity and social issues appear (Wadsworth, 1989), a progression that can be noted by examining the National Council for the Social Studies’ (1994) thematic strands from a developmental perspective. Thus, the middle grades should be the setting where students realize that studying history involves more than memorizing dates, names, and places. For this reason, middle-level teachers must teach both history and the historical process. Because history is not their content field, language arts teachers face an extra task in teaching the Holocaust, that is, they must develop approaches to teaching both the historical process and historical events, factors that typically do not align with their expertise in language arts education.

Teaching about the Holocaust in Middle-Level Language Arts Classrooms
Shawn (2001) holds that the language arts classroom is an appropriate setting for middle-level study of the Holocaust to occur because studying literature allows students to examine specific bodies of knowledge; personalize the events that are described; consider universal themes and concerns; question the actions of individuals and institutions; and consider responses to life-defining and life-altering situations. Moreover, studying literature in a discussion-rich environment implements Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory of teaching and learning because that approach “awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when a child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (p. 90). When this occurs, the result is “the creation of a learning environment [that] can be conceived of as a shared problem space, inviting the students to participate in a process of negotiation and co-construction of knowledge” (Haenen, Schrijnemakers, and Stutkens, 2004, p. 246).

**Entering the World of Holocaust Literature**

Establishing an event’s historical context is necessary if students are to understand the importance of episodes that occur within that event as well as the overall situation. This concept is especially vital when considering the Shoah because “… it is very easy to get tunnel vision when teaching the Holocaust or parts of it. One must always try to keep it in historical perspective” (Crowe, 2001, p. 54). Thus, the importance of how best to anchor curricula within the general context of Holocaust history must be addressed.

To develop students’ historical knowledge, teachers can utilize the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s website ([www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)) to implement a two-step process that will provide background knowledge while being mindful of time constraints all teachers face. In the first step, students watch two animated maps. The first map, “World War II in Europe,” provides an overview of the war’s evolution. The second map, “The Holocaust,” sets the Shoah within the umbrella the war provided, a necessary focus because the Holocaust could not have occurred without the war (Bergen, 2009). The animated nature of these maps captures students’ attention, and each animation’s length (about three minutes) provides for the efficient use of time.

The second step involves presenting the article “Introduction to the Holocaust” to students. Located in the “Holocaust Encyclopedia” section of the USHMM website, this article begins by providing a definition of the Shoah that, when deconstructed, answers several critical questions, including:

1. What was the Holocaust?
2. Who was responsible for it?
3. When did it occur?
4. How was it implemented?
5. What groups were targeted for persecution?
6. Why was each group targeted?
7. What was the intended goal of Nazi policy toward each group?

The article then provides a brief overview of the Nazi era that discusses the concentration camp system, the ghettos, the invasion of the Soviet Union and the initiation of mass murder, the killing centers, the death marches that occurred near war’s end, and the aftermath of the Holocaust. While a short article cannot develop the Shoah’s complexity fully, the essay does provide a base on which students can build their historical knowledge as they read *Friedrich*.

This two-step process can be implemented effectively in two class sessions, providing students with background information needed to understand the book’s story line while making efficient use of class time. In implementing this approach, teachers should prepare critical questions that can advance classroom discourse, resulting in conversations that occur at high taxonomic levels. Class discussions should move back and forth between...
the maps and the essay, thus developing a challenging classroom atmosphere.

A Rationale for Teaching Friedrich in Middle-Level Language Arts Classes

Given these factors, the novella Friedrich becomes an excellent forum through which the Shoah can be presented to middle-level students in ways that are developmentally appropriate and historically accurate. As Drew (2001) notes, “The novel is short and highly readable; it is easy enough to be accessible to young readers, and at the same time compelling enough to satisfy high school students” (p. 14). In addition, the narrative observes Culbertson’s concerns that were discussed earlier in this paper.

Friedrich supports the development of historical knowledge by presenting an accurate historical account. Each chapter’s title references a specific year, thus presenting the timeline of the pre-Nazi and Nazi eras while helping students develop chronological thinking, that is “... the ability to understand change over time, with relationships derived from a baseline of phenomena” (Drake and Nelson, 2009, p. 20).

The book also establishes a solid contextual structure that allows students to understand the changing circumstances that confronted Germans living during the Nazi era. While some chapters describe episodes that affect only the story’s characters, these situations are also symptomatic of trends developing in German society in general. Conversely, other chapters describe major events such as the nationwide boycott of Jewish-owned stores (April, 1933) or the Kristallnacht (November, 1938); in these cases, incidents affecting Friedrich and Hans, the book’s two main figures, are woven into the “headline” events that are occurring.

General Information about Friedrich

Some background information about the book will help teachers plan their work with it. Author Hans Peter Richter (1926-1993) was a schoolboy during the early years of the Nazi era, served in the Wehrmacht from 1942-1945, and studied psychology and sociology after the war, earning a doctorate in 1968. Friedrich was published in the original German in 1961 and in English in 1970. It was followed by I Was There (1962) and The Time of the Young Soldiers (1976). Although not stated explicitly, Richter assumes the role of a participant/narrator in Friedrich, a perspective that was confirmed in I Was There. As such, this paper refers to the narrator as Hans, the best friend of Friedrich, the German Jewish boy who is the book’s central character.

This paper proposes that studying Friedrich provides an appropriate initial experience with the Holocaust for middle-level students. Given this assertion, the development of effective approaches to teaching the Shoah in the middle-level language arts setting can occur by implementing curricula based on the book.

Organizing Friedrich for Classroom Use

Having concluded the two-step defining process described earlier, students will be ready to begin reading the book. Friedrich can be divided into several themes that align with the evolving events of the time. The following narrative presents an example of this approach.

“Normalcy” (Chapters 1-6)

The book’s opening chapters develop Friedrich’s story prior to the Nazi assumption of power (January, 1933). His life is typical for a German youngster who happens to be Jewish. Blatant, virulent antisemitism is not apparent, but covert hints of coming troubles can be identified. For example, Hans’s grandfather is upset when he learns that his grandson’s best friend is Jewish. The elderly man proclaims “We are Christians. Bear in mind that the Jews crucified our Lord” [italics added for emphasis in both cases]! The elderly man proclaims “We are Christians. Bear in mind that the Jews crucified our Lord” and rebukes his daughter for allowing Hans to play with Friedrich. He then announces that “I do not wish to have the boy associate with this Jew” [italics added for emphasis in both cases]! In this scene, Friedrich considers himself to be German, but Hans’s Grandfather labels him a
Jew. This distinction will lead to fateful consequences for German Jews as the Nazi era unfolds.

“Transition” (Chapters 7-13)
These chapters are set in 1933, the year in which the Nazi regime was established. As typified by the nationwide boycott of Jewish-owned stores that occurred on April 1, this is a time of experimentation by the Nazis. Small, incremental steps are taken so that the new regime can gauge its power and the people’s acquiescence to a wave of anti-Jewish regulations and laws. As such, several scenes illustrate subtle changes that begin to affect Jews in Germany. Friedrich accepts the blame for a window that is broken when the boys are playing in order to avert a nasty scene; Hans joins the Jungvolk because that is what good German boys are supposed to do; landlord Resch is unsuccessful in taking legal action to evict the Schneiders (Friedrich’s family) from their apartment because they are Jewish; and Hans’s father joins the Nazi Party in order to protect his job. In a prophetic exchange, the judge who dismisses Resch’s lawsuit says to Friedrich, “You don’t have to worry. Nothing will happen to you. That’s why I am here, to see that justice is done.” Sensing that the troubles to be faced are just beginning, Friedrich responds, “You, yes!”

“Exclusion” (Chapters 14-19)
The regime used a legal framework to disenfranchise German Jews. Each law enacted was designed to erect economic, political, and social barriers between them and the majority German population. For example, Friedrich must transfer to a Jewish school. When this occurs, Herr Neudorf, his teacher, displays the divide that is evolving in German society. He tells the class that Friedrich has done nothing wrong and wishes him well. However, as the boy leaves the room, Neudorf brings the class to attention when he proclaims “Heil, Hitler!” Similarly, several other situations that occur depict the growing isolation faced by German Jews: Frau Penk can no longer work as a maid for the Schneiders because they are Jews; Hans’s father admits that he has joined the Nazi Party because it is good for his family that he do so; and Friedrich must leave the swimming pool after showing a Jewish identification card. Despite these incidents, the Schneiders attempt to move ahead with life. For example, Friedrich celebrates his Bar Mitzvah, with Herr Neudorf making a surprise visit during which he gives his former pupil an engraved fountain pen. However, the sense of exclusion soon returns when several students, including Hans, berate Jewish students whom they meet on the street. The Jews still live in Germany, but they are not part of Germany; they are no longer Germans.

“Precipice” (Chapters 20-22)
The book’s narrative revolves around these chapters. Most critically, “The Pogrom” describes Kristallnacht (November, 1938), the key event in the evolution of the Nazis’ anti-Jewish policies and the coming of the Shoah that is often labeled “the point of no return” for German Jews. Throughout Germany, rioters loot Jewish-owned shops, synagogues, and homes and assault German Jews. Hans witnesses these events, catching himself being overtaken by the “lust for destruction” and admitting that “All this was strangely exhilarating.” He realizes the situation’s gravity, however, when he learns that Frau Schneider has died from injuries that occurred when rioters broke into her apartment. Her husband tries to rebuild his life even though he knows that this cannot be accomplished; the life of German Jews has changed forever.

“Intensity” (Chapters 23-25)
The lives of Friedrich and his father have deteriorated dramatically in the two years since Kristallnacht. Increased pressures affect Friedrich, who is afraid when he violates the law in order to attend a movie. Later, he stops dating a German girl who is infatuated with him because he realizes that she could face severe punishment if her affection for a Jewish boy
were known. Hans faces a crucial decision when he learns that the Schneiders are hiding a rabbi who is being sought by the police. Will he betray the rabbi or place his own family in danger? Both Friedrich and Hans now confront the reality of living in Nazi Germany, albeit in immeasurably different ways.

“Destruction” (Chapters 26-31)
Events are spiraling out of control. German Jews must wear the Star of David (September, 1941), and Herr Schneider and the rabbi are arrested. Landlord Resch loots the Schneiders’ apartment, and Friedrich assaults him in a defiant act of resistance. Friedrich tries to find a picture of his parents, for that is all he has left to remind himself of his former life. Resch, now the neighborhood air raid warden, refuses to allow Friedrich to stay in a shelter even though several people plead with him to allow the boy to remain. After an air raid, Hans, his parents, and Resch find Friedrich’s body in the garden of their apartment building. In a telling statement about the fate of Jews who have been resettled to the East (i.e., deported to killing centers in occupied Poland), the book concludes when Resch says, “His luck that he died this way” [italics in original].

Notes on Teaching Friedrich
Linking Small-Scale and Large-Scale Events
The series of incidents that surround and eventually overwhelm Friedrich should be tied to the wider events of which they are representative. Because most of the book’s episodes can be correlated directly with topics included in the USHMM website’s “Holocaust Encyclopedia,” this linkage can be achieved by moving the classroom flow back-and-forth between the book and that resource. Using this approach ensures that historical accuracy is maintained while students’ knowledge is enhanced.

Personalizing the Holocaust
Various perspectives about the book’s characters should be stressed. Hans’s mother wants to help the Schneiders but fears the consequences that might affect her family. Hans is overtaken by the emotions of the Kristallnacht but remains Friedrich’s friend. Herr Richter wants to help the Schneiders and is appalled by the Nazis’ tactics but joins the Nazi Party in order to protect his job and family. Neudorf is kind to Friedrich as the boy is being expelled from school, but leads the class in a Nazi greeting. Resch is the book’s most consistent character as he seeks to turn every situation to his advantage. Examining these personal behaviors and the character traits they represent adds nuanced meaning to students’ work with the book.

This focus on characterization is one of the book’s major strengths as it develops the uniqueness of each of the characters, thus adhering to the concept that Holocaust education should stress how individuals were affected by the Shoah instead of becoming enmeshed in “a welter of statistics” (Totten, 1987, p. 63). Building on this approach, teachers can use various resources to enhance student learning about the event’s personal consequences. For example, the USHMM’s website includes many short, focused segments of survivor testimony (i.e., filmed oral history); the section “Personal Histories;” and several hundred one-page identification cards, each telling the story of an individual whose life was either ended or altered forever by the Holocaust.

A Necessary Extension of the Book
Having identified Friedrich’s strengths, this paper must address one factor that teachers must overcome if their work with it is to be comprehensive. The book ends when Friedrich dies from injuries suffered in an air raid in 1942. As a result, he does not experience the process of deportation and annihilation that became the fate of most German Jews who were still alive at that time.

Friedrich’s ending thus precludes students from seeing the Holocaust’s totality. In
this regard, Culbertson (2001) notes the problematic nature of curricula that take students “up to gates of the concentration camps and not inside” (p. 66). For this reason, Holocaust units based on Friedrich must be supplemented with discussions about what happened between Friedrich’s death in 1942 and the end of war in 1945. This focus can be accomplished effectively by using relevant sections of the “Holocaust Encyclopedia,” found on the USHMM website.

Some Additional Suggestions for Teaching Friedrich

The book’s flow suggests the chronology of the Nazi regime of its persecution of German Jews. As such, teachers may find it helpful to post two parallel timelines in their classrooms, one focusing on the book and the other on the Nazi era in general. This approach helps students “understand[ing] the interrelationship of events and individuals over a temporal period” (Beal, Bolick, and Martorella, 2009, p. 203) as they compare occurrences and organize data.

The USHMM’s website includes a vast array of photographs that can be accessed topically using its search function. Students may use this function to develop photographic collages of events discussed in the book, build image-based timelines, illustrate the series of laws imposed by the Nazi regime, and portray changes that occurred in German society as the regime solidified and extended its power.

As noted earlier, the book ends with Friedrich’s death in 1942. Alternatively, students may write additional chapters that trace what might have happened to Friedrich had he not been killed in the air raid described in the chapter titled “The End.” Because any additional chapters would need to be accurate historically (thus maintaining a critical element present in the book), this assignment would require students to research what happened during the final three years of the Holocaust and World War II, a process that would further develop historical knowledge. The USHMM website could be used as the basic resource for this assignment.

Summary

Friedrich has been described as “one of the most powerful pictures of the early years of the Third Reich ... There is an authenticity in Friedrich that does not reflect the experiences of all German children who lived during these years, but certainly expresses the experiences of many” (Drew, 2001, p. 14). Thus, the book provides an appropriate entry into the world of the Shoah for middle-level students, allowing them to witness what happens to two boys whose worlds are intertwined within the framework of a pivotal historical event. Perhaps most importantly, this entry is conducted in ways that are intellectually honest and developmentally responsive to the needs of middle-level students.

Notes

1 The Hebrew word Shoah (i.e., catastrophe, destruction, or complete ruination) is an alternative term for the more commonly used word Holocaust. This paper uses the words interchangeably.

2 To access photographs from the USHMM website, go to the search function located in the upper-right hand corner of the website’s home page. Using the drop-down function, access “Photographs,” enter the desired topic, and click “Search.”

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