A Phenomenological Study of Student Engagement in United States History Classrooms

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN UNITED STATES HISTORY CLASSROOMS

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate the completion of this dissertation to my family, those who were blessed to me by birth and those who God placed in my life for a reason. A special feeling of gratitude to my loving parents, Louis and Hester Manigault, Sr., who from my earliest memories believed that an education was one of the most important gifts they could offer their children. To my sisters, Renida, Desma, Rosaiah, Christine, Megan and my brothers, Louis II and Isaiah, thank you for supporting me during this journey.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my good friend Alvin Lewis Perry whose words of encouragement ring in my ears. Your constant inquires as to my progress, and most importantly your pressing made all the difference in my world. To Femeia Adamson—thank you for the final push and respecting the time and energy it took for me to complete this task. Sometimes you know me better than I know myself.

Finally, I dedicate this research to educators who have the ability to show their love and dedication not only to learning, but to the students they serve daily. Those that I have had the pleasure of working with have shared their support and expertise with me over the years and it has made me a better teacher. I hope that the small contribution of this dissertation will add to the wealth of knowledge we all share! Thank you.
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I began this journey to fulfill my dream of achieving a doctorate degree in education. I was not aware of the energy, time and perseverance that I would have to invest to achieve this goal, nor did I realize how much I would learn through the process. I would not have accomplished this without the guidance and wisdom of so many experts who offered their encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the relationship between student engagement and the perception of academic achievement (learning) by teachers and students in an urban high school social studies course. Over the past several years, educational leaders and researchers have tried to find a cause for a number of issues in public education, including low academic achievement, increasing student dropout rates and the decline of positive perceptions of schools in general. As a result, there has been increasing research done on the level of engagement that students experience during their schooling. Much of the research has focused on how students are cognitively, socially, and emotionally engaged in school. Often, students and schools that are described as “at risk” are found to have lower levels of student engagement (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). This fact has been a foundation for the research in this area.

This phenomenological study was completed using two qualitative methods: (1) observation of the instructional practices in two classrooms to offer a descriptive overview of the levels of engagement and (2) interviewing two teachers and six students about their experiences in their social studies classrooms. The study was conducted in United States history classrooms with students at the general level (e.g. non-Honors and non-Advanced Placement). This study is of particular significance as it seeks to determine whether engagement and academic achievement are related based on the personal perceptions of teachers and students.
Keywords: student engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, social studies
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

“When I am not engaged, it is because the work is not intellectually engaging.”
HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent

The concept of student engagement as a factor in academic achievement has its foundation in late 20th century research that suggests that students who are actively involved in their education and the educational process perform at higher levels of achievement than their less engaged counterparts. The concept of engagement as tied to the work designed by teachers and expected of students is rooted in the belief that work that is of interest or relevant to the student leads to greater academic achievement (Schlechty, 2004). A report of the Gates Foundation (2006) found that 81% of students believed that improving teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and the “real-world” would decrease dropout rates and lead to positive outcomes for students. If engagement is the key to lower drop-out rates and higher levels of achievement among secondary students, it is important to understand the characteristics necessary for students to experience engagement. A report of the International Center for Leadership in Education cites a number of additional positive outcomes related to an increase in student engagement, including an increase in institutional respect, the development of supportive structures and an improvement in classroom management (Jones, 2008).
In order to determine what, if any, relationship lies between perception of student engagement and perceptions of academic success, this study gathers the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of study participants regarding this relationship.

**What is Engagement?**

Research has shown that engagement is a key component of academic success; however, defining the term has proven difficult and most people, including researchers, disagree on what constitutes student engagement. The foundation of academic engagement rests on ideas related to student on-task behaviors and active participation in the learning environment (Harris, 2008). Much of the research related to the study of engagement centers on the work of individuals in the 1980’s and 90’s, including Alexander Astin whose theory of involvement for higher education has served as the inspiration for much of the research done at the secondary level. Astin’s theory states that, “the greater the student’s involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of the student learning and personal development” (Astin, 1999). Much of the research presented on secondary education supports that students who are engaged in their high schools, particularly with regards to social interactions and peer/instructor relationships also leads to positive engagement factors and academic success. Additional research from the late 20th and early 21st centuries focuses on engagement as it relates to student discipline, motivation and drop-out rates among high school students (Frederick, et. al, 2011)

In recent years, researchers have used the term engagement to focus on how student assign importance to academic success and participate in curricular and extracurricular activities that promote attachment to their environment (Willms, 2003).
**Theories of Student Engagement**

The theories developed by Finn (1989, 1992), Finn and Voelkl (1993) and Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) are the basis for much of the research on student engagement at the secondary level. Finn’s (1989) model proposes that patterns of engagement and disengagement may have long-term effects on behavior and academic achievement in the later educational years. He highlighted that school outcomes are mediated by “students’ active participation in school and classroom activities and a concomitant feeling of identification with school.” The model also asserts that identification occurs when students internalize the feelings that they “belong” in school—both that they are a conspicuous part of the school environment and that the school is an important aspect of their own experience (Finn, 1993). Additionally, students who have a sense of belonging value success in “school-relevant goals” (Finn, 1989).

Most important is the idea that in order for students to achieve academic success, there must be a connection between student participation and learning. “In the classroom, active participation is the minimal essential condition for formal learning to occur” (Finn, 1989). The research acknowledges that levels of participation increase with age, require greater involvement, and imply a stronger internal locus of control. However, this research also suggests that teacher-initiated instruction coupled with student-initiated instruction, participation in out-of-school activities, and participation in school governance encourages greater engagement and is associated with better performance throughout high school (Duffy et al., 2003).

Valuing academics is an endorsement of the goals of the school and views of the importance and relevance of academic achievement. Social engagement is the
identification and behavioral involvement with the social aspects of school including informal out of school activities, relationships with members of the school, extracurricular activities, and teacher contacts out of school. Valuing is holding beliefs that have been socially involved and displaying an interest in the social aspects of the school (Fredricks, et. al, 2011).

Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) identified three components of engagement in the research literature: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement. These specific components of engagement have been studied and have been evidenced by specific measurements of the educational process. The first component of engagement in school is behavioral; this is evidenced by the academic and extracurricular participation of students. Emotional engagement is marked by feelings of belongingness, frustration, boredom, interest and satisfaction as well as student-teacher relations and support. Some researchers refer to this as psychological engagement (Appleton, Christenson, Kim & Reschly, 2006). The third component is cognitive engagement; this is seen in the investment a student makes to school and its tasks.

The key to engaging students includes challenging curriculums and modes of instruction that are meaningful and authentic. Additionally, interest in engagement rest on the concept’s two distinguishing features. Engagement differs from prior research concerning the separate yet related fields of interest—motivation, attitudes and student conduct---in its effort to study the precursors and result of the three components functioning together in a dynamic system (Fredricks et al, 2004).
Student Engagement and Academic Achievement

Does it matter if students are engaged in their classroom activities? One of an educator’s primary roles is to facilitate learning in the classroom. In order for meaningful learning to take place, students must pay attention and engage the current task. “When students are authentically engaged in meaningful, quality work, the likelihood for them to learn something new and to remember what was learned increases” (Hancock & Betts, 2002). Students do not only learn more when they are engaged, they are also more likely to maintain the knowledge taught. Furthermore, students that are engaged are more likely to be motivated to learn more and to try their best. When students are motivated, their quality of work increases (Bogren, 2009).

Teacher-Student Relationship in Engagement

The importance of teacher support and caring has been highlighted throughout the research on student engagement; it has been found to have a high predictive value for higher levels of student engagement (Smerdon, 2002). “Non-parental adults constitute one potentially important asset, and supportive teachers with high expectations may play a critical role in school success” (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). Caring teachers have been studied as a contributor to higher levels of student engagement (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). Russell et al. (2006) listed how teachers matter; teachers who enjoyed teaching and subject matter, respected students, involved students in decision making, cared about students, explained clearly, and responded to requests for help raised the engagement levels of students.
Marzano (2004) identifies student engagement as the continuous involvement of students in learning. It is described as a cyclical process, planned and facilitated by the teacher, in which students move constantly between periods of action and periods of reflection. Learning requires engagement in tasks that are structured and are sufficiently similar to allow for effective transfer of knowledge. Marzano’s assertion further illustrates the significant relationship that the teacher plays in the development of engaging activities for students (p. 113).

In Chapter 2 of this study, greater emphasis is placed on related research and literature associated with student engagement and academic achievement with a focus on various research studies that have highlighted the significance of this issue.

Statement of the Problem

Particularly for children living in marginalized situations, the lack of engagement, that is the desire and pursuit of academic achievement, carries social costs for the individual. It is closely tied to higher risks of misbehavior, criminal activity (Catalano et al, 2001), dropout (Alexander et al., 1997) and to diminished career opportunities. These risks are consequently associated with post-secondary outcomes, including lower incomes for students who do not receive a high school diploma. These consequences also have an economic effect on society as many of these students eventually need public assistance to maintain at least a minimal standard of living (Rhodes, 2007). If schools are to be held accountable for students’ post-secondary success, including attaining a high school diploma, qualifying for acceptance in institution of higher learning,
preparation for post-secondary work, then a focus on student engagement must be an inescapable goal (Schlechty, 2004, p. 14).

Yazzie-Mintz (2009) suggest that based on the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) annual report, engagement is the single greatest factor in student success in secondary, as well as post-secondary educational settings.

Based on the research, if the correlation between student engagement and academic success holds, then students who are engaged have higher academic success, lower risks of misbehavior and criminal activities, lower drop-out rates and increased career opportunities.

Engagement is not a clearly defined psychological construct; it requires more research in order to fully comprehend its complexity. It is suggested that with parental and teacher involvement and a sense of community, student engagement can be nurtured to result in a meaningful attachment to school and academic success (Vazibardi, 2010).

**The Nature of the Study**

This study was conducted using qualitative methods, specifically structured as a phenomenological study. The choice of research methodology centers on the need “to illuminate the specific and identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in the situation” (Lester, 1999). That stated, research studies use observation and interviews of teachers and students to determine whether there is a perceived relationship between the level of engagement that students experience in a classroom and the perception of academic achievement. Although there have been many studies conducted
in the area of engagement in recent years, there is not a specific measure that has been found to be valid or reliable in measuring student achievement.

This study centers on three research questions which serve as the foundation for the observations and interview conducted by the researcher.

1. In what ways do student perceptions of engagement correspond with their measured levels of academic achievement?

2. What instructional factors do teachers and students recognize as aiding engagement in the classroom?

3. What other factors contribute to students’ high or low levels of engagement?

Based on preliminary investigations that suggest a relationship between student engagement and academic success, the researcher believed that the study would offer additional evidence to support this relationship. It is likely that at the conclusion of the student and teacher interviews, evidence will show that students and teachers believe that engagement leads to greater success for students. The research objectives lie in the practical application of student engagement to increase student achievement and improving the educational process for both teachers and students.

Chapter 3 offers a detailed explanation of the research study, including the methods, study context, procedures for ethical treatment of participants, as well as the data selection and analysis system.
Conceptual Framework

Measures of Student Engagement

Several studies have been done to examine how the components of student engagement correlate with various levels of achievement in school (Finn, 1993; Finn & Voelkl, 1003; Fredricks et al., 2004; Fullarton, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Shernoff et al., 2003). Researchers used a variety of methods to gather data on the components of engagement including observation, self-reported perceptions of engagement, anecdotal records and student demographic and achievement data.

Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement involves observable or reported levels of conduct, participation, persistence and academic involvement of students, compliance with rules and on/off-task behavior (Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Klem and Connell (2004) measured student engagement sampling both teachers and students. Teacher measures focused on student behavior and performance and found engagement is a robust predictor of academic success. Duffy et al. (2005) found participation in class raised engagement levels by measuring effort, interaction, and persistence in learning.

Additional Factors Related to Student Engagement

Additional studies have been done to identify how school characteristics impact student engagement (Smerdon, 2002). Smerdon (2002) found sustained student membership in a school is impacted by the school’s organization, environment, composition and structure. Finn (1989) found school characteristics that are considered to
be antecedents to student engagement include the structural environment and the regulatory environment. Likewise, Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) organized the antecedents to student engagement into school level factors, classroom connects and individual student needs. School-level engagement relates to the impact that factors such as school size and teacher-student ratio have on engagement. Structural factors include the hierarchy and organization of the school (Johnson, 2001).

**Purpose of and Justification for the Study**

The purpose of this study is to describe factors that aid engagement based on the perception of teachers and students in a secondary setting with the intent to design strategies that support teachers' instructional design and aid student learning. This study provides information to support research that has been conducted previously that suggests that students who are engaged in the educational process have higher academic achievement compared to their less engaged counterparts (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). Additionally, teachers who routinely develop lessons and instructional activities aimed at increasing student engagement tend to have students who achieve higher academic success in their respective classrooms compared to educators who place little or no focus on student engagement as a determinate for students’ success (Schlechty, 2004, p. 121).

Of additional consideration in the purpose of this study are the implications embedded in a change in instructional expectations and understandings for teachers. Schlechty (2011, p. 14) points out that students can be involved in their learning, as well as compliant in the learning process, but may not be engaged in their learning. An involved, on-task or compliant student may complete tasks as assigned, yet not be attentive to, **committed to, persistent to or value** the assignments they are expected to
complete (p. 15). This study offers education professionals justification for student engagement.

Public schools are faced with a number of serious issues in the 21st century. Diminishing budgets, low achievement and dropout rates top the list of substantive issues. In short, public faith in the public education system is under attack for perceived or real problems. Researchers, educators and policy makers are increasingly focused on student engagement as a means of addressing low achievement, student boredom, and increasing rates of high school drop outs (Fredricks, et al., 2004).

**A Nation at Risk**

The 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* ushered a new era in public education in the United States. This report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education called for sweeping reforms in public education and teacher training with the intent of improving public schools. This led to an unprecedented focus on “high-stakes” testing and academic standards to improve the system. As a result of this publication, the focus on student engagement that some researcher suggests was inherent to community based learning structures were lost to increased governmental control of the curriculum (Meagher, 2007). Additionally, the implementation of standardized testing has forced many educators to focus on “teaching to the test,” with little or no regard to student interest and participatory learning (Harris, 2008).
No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The early part of the 21st century saw the rebirth of the “back to the basics” education movement indicative of the late 1970’s and early 80’s. In 2000, Diane Ravitch wrote *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* which criticized progressive educational policies and argued for a traditional, academically-oriented education (Meagher, 2007). In 2001, Congress approved a controversial piece of legislation called No Child Left Behind (NCLB). President George H.W. Bush signed the bill into law in 2002, which mandated high-stakes tests and held schools accountable for student achievement levels. Schools who do not meet the standards set by the legislation are penalized.

The new accountability is measured by adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements and coupled with increasing stiff sanctions if all students do not meet established goals (Charp, 2003). School leaders can no longer be judged solely on how well they manage administrative duties. The quality of the leader must now relate to a school’s capacity to ensure achievement for all students.

The widespread consensus on outcome-based accountability has created new challenges for school leaders. Policymakers and practitioners have yet to agree on a common strategy to transform low performing schools into high performing learning communities. As public education enters the 21st century, the public increasingly looks for more efficient and equitable ways of providing schooling services that meet their high expectations. In some locales, city and state governments have taken over the public schools (Moore, 2007).
Solís (2009) suggests that in order to create schools that work for all children, teachers must teach for engagement. Cited literature points to student engagement as a prerequisite to student learning with the addition of cognitive engagement as necessary. A high percentage of students on the most recent High School Survey of Student Engagement state that school lack basic structures to engage them in the work that is expected (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). This survey clearly illustrates students’ disenchantment with the current focus of the educational system and calls for greater emphasis on engaging work to aid academic achievement.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms relative to the discussion of student engagement and its relationship to student achievement are used for the purpose of this study and are defined here for clarification as there are multiple definitions in the literature.

*Student engagement:* The degree to which students are motivated and committed to learning, demonstrate positive behaviors and attitudes, and have relationships with adults, peers, and parents that support learning (Daggett, 2005, p. 38).

*Academic Success:* knowledge, skills and qualities generally acquired during formal education the leads to an individual’s future success (Lucas & Murray, 1992).

*Behavioral/Social engagement.* Social or behavioral engagement involves student levels of conduct, persistence, and participation in school activities. Participation in school
activities includes those activities in and out of the classroom that are sponsored by the school (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004; Suh & Suh, 2006).

**Cognitive engagement:** This dimension of engagement involves the thoughtfulness and willingness students have to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills. It includes student investment in problem solving, work styles, perceptions of success or failure and the preference for challenge (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).

**Emotional engagement.** This dimension of engagement includes student reactions to teachers, classmates, academics and school; it also involves the student’s willingness to work in the learning environment (Finn, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004).

**Motivation:** The driving force by which we accomplish our goals; typically identified as intrinsic or extrinsic (Seligman, 1990).

**High performing students:** For the purposes of this study, students who have attained a grade of A or B in their United States History course and are active participants in coursework as described by their classroom teacher.

**Social Studies:** the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence (National Council for the Social Studies, 2011).
Assumptions and Limitations

There are several assumptions that should be considered in the construct of this study, including the fact that students who are engaged (based on the definition set forth in this study) will likely find greater academic success due to their high level of attention to their work. Additionally, students who are intrinsically motivated may report higher levels of engagement that are unrelated to external forces (e.g. teacher encouragement, design of the lesson, etc.).

The study is limited due to its framework in that the researcher is only interviewing two teachers and six students, as well as the fact that the students selected for are high performers. Although this is a limitation of the study, it fits the construct of a phenomenological investigation in that the research is focused on the perceptions of the participants in order to generalize the conclusion of the study. An additional limitation is that the participants are connected to a social studies curriculum, which may prove more engaging due to its nature. In other words, teachers and students in a mathematics course may report lower levels of engagement due to the construct and instructional design necessary to teach the course.

Another limitation that must be presented is the fact that the teacher participants were known to the researcher prior to the study. In fact, one of the teachers was hired by the researcher at another school to fill a teaching position twelve years before the study was conducted. Subsequently, both teachers were supervised by the researcher as the district Social Studies Supervisor for three years. During that time, the researcher had the opportunity to observe the teacher participants’ instruction and assessment practices, as well as their relationship with their students and their cohorts. During the study the
researcher was conscious of personal biases that might affect the conclusions presented in the study. In Chapter 3, the teacher and student selection process is described. The description includes the justification for the selection of the teachers based on a recommendation from the administration of the school, as well as their willingness to participate in the study.

**Significance of the Study**

**Knowledge Generation**

This study adds to the current discourse on the importance of engagement to academic success in the completion of secondary education. This research is significant in that it offers social, emotional, and educational framework for change. School success had implications not only for schools, but also for communities (Woods, 1995). This research is designed to identify school-related factors of student engagement and the relationship between a high level of student engagement and academic success (Suh & Suh, 2007). Since much of the studies conducted on student engagement to date have centered on quantitative methods which simply measure whether or not students feel engaged in their education (Schlechty, 2011, p. 97) as opposed to why, when and how they feel engaged, this study offers additional explanation that should provide insight into processes association with the acquisition of engagement in classroom setting.

**Professional Application**

As much of the research suggests, increasing student engagement requires significant changes in instructional methods and expectations for student learning (Kuh, 2001). In that regard, this study is also significant because it is based on student and
teacher perceptions of their educational experience and thus can provide specific local data to direct decision-making for on-site programs. This is of increasing importance as schools are expected to place greater emphasis on data to direct decision making (Daggett, 2005). Furthermore, Schlechty (2011, p. 113) suggested that in the 21st century the roles of teachers must change to that of a leader, designer and guide to instruction as opposed to simply disseminating information to students. The assertion made is that teachers should design opportunities for students to learn that engages them in the learning process.

**Social Changes**

Perhaps the greatest influences this study might have on the educational system is the implications for social change in the school environment. Harris (2008) suggests that improving student engagement has a tremendous effect on the student-teacher, as well as the student-school environment relationship. This is further supported by evidence that shows an increase of meaningful processing of content, increased participation in learning and focused attention by students who claim to be engaged in their learning (Schreiner & Louis, 2008). These changes could have a positive effect on student connectedness to the learning environment.

**Summary**

Research studies support engagement as a factor in improving student outcomes and the influence of teacher effectiveness upon student learning. When teachers become proficient in the implementation of strategies to encourage the engagement of disengaged students, students are better able to develop skills that move learning from knowledge
acquisition to application (Schlechty, 2002). This study offers additional evidence to support this belief through the phenomenological study of teacher and student perceptions in a social studies class. This information provides a clear justification for changes in teacher behaviors that improves student engagement and thus improve student academic achievement. In Chapter 2 of this study, the researcher offers a review of available literature that supports the connection between student engagement and academic achievement. Chapter 3 highlights the methods that were used to implement the study, as well as the strategies that were used to collect and analyze the data. Chapter 4 offers a detailed overview of the results of the study. In Chapter 5, the researcher identifies areas for additional research based on limitations of the current research and any additional issues that arise during the execution of this study.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this research is to determine the patterns of student engagement and the perceived relationship to academic achievement for high school social studies students. This chapter reviews literature addressing research relevant to this study. The literature offers the following:

1. A definition of engagement as found in various research literature;
2. Theoretical framework for student engagement;
3. A description of measures that test for engagement with a focus on the school success and academic achievement;
4. An overview of the major themes related to engagement within the literature as it relates to the research question in this study.

The researcher identified evidence on engagement through the use of the online database at the University of South Carolina and through the use of the DISCUS online article database available through Richland County Public Library (Columbia, S.C.). The key terms used for the database searches were (1) students engagement; (2) academic engagement; (3) cognitive engagement; (4) behavioral/social engagement and, (4) emotional engagement. Only peer-reviewed articles from academic journals were used as a part of the literature review. Additionally, the researcher used the key terms to find various related texts at Richland County Library and many of the sources were acquired through Inter-Library Loan.
As this research focuses primarily on student and teacher perceptions of engagement in high school social studies classes, it is important that the literature provides definitions and measures that can be utilized by the subjects during the experiment. This allows the researcher to assess whether or not there is a relationship between the perception of engagement by teacher and student and the academic success of the student.

**Defining Engagement**

Recent research has placed great emphasis on the importance of engagement as a critical factor in student success. Engagement has a variety of definitions in the literature and yet there is no prevailing definition found in the research. In fact, many researchers argue that defining, operationalizing and measuring engagement is similar to the challenges that occur when dealing with other broad psychological constructions due to the individualized nature of how it is perceived (Dweck & Elliot, 2005).

Definitions of engagement from research include a student’s sense of belonging, participation in classes and attendance (Willms, 2003), the narrow challenge between boredom and anxiety (Shernoff & Csikszentmihaly, 2003) a psychological process of attention, interest, investment and effort toward learning (Marks, 2000), and the link between teaching and learning (Smith, et all 1991). Others have suggested vastly different definitions of engagement, focusing on engagement as it relates to psychological motivation. The National Research Council (2004) argues that engagement and motivation are synonymous. Newman (1992) suggests that whereas motivation and engagement are related, engagement is much more because it involved active interest, effort and concentration in school work. Schlechty (2004) supports Newman’s claims,
but argues that in order for students to experience engagement, there must be commitment, persistence and **attentive** to the work that is expected in school.

Other reviews of the term engagement show a similar breadth of definitions. Jimerson, et. al (2003) found that in a review of 37 articles, 31 did not offer a specific definition for the term, but instead gave a range of “observable characteristics related to engagement or engagement as a psychological construct. Libbey (2002) found that many researchers identify terms such as connectedness, belonging community membership, motivation and attachment as definitions for engagement. This research points out that researchers often have difficulty agreeing on the appropriate construct by which to define student engagement, which is described in greater detail, with specificity, throughout this review of literature. The inability for researchers to agree upon a clear definition of engagement adds to the difficulty of understanding a clear framework and measure for engagement.

**Theoretical Frameworks for Student Engagement**

The theories developed by Finn (1992), Finn and Voelkl (1993) and Fredricks, et. al. (2004) have framed a majority of the research on student engagement. Finn (1992) created a participation-identification model that proposed patterns of engagement and disengagement can have long-term effects on behavior and academic achievement in the later educational years. He highlighted that school outcomes are mediated by “students’ active participation in school and classroom activities and a concomitant feeling of identification with school (Finn, 1992).
The idea of belonging has been found consistently in engagement literature. Using social anthropology as a framework, Tinto (1988) noted the first step to engagement is establishing membership or a sense of belonging in a society. As detailed in the models developed by Finn (1989, 1992), identification occurs when students internalize the feelings that they “belong” in school—both that they are a conspicuous part of the school environment and that the school is an important aspect of their own experience (Finn, 1993). Additionally, students who have a sense of belonging value success in “school-relevant goals” (Finn, 1993). The duality of valuing and belonging is important in Finn’s definition of identification as it has guided other researchers (Smerdon, 2002). Finn (1993) defined participation as the extent to which a student participates in classroom and school activities Finn (1989) noted, “In the classroom, active participation is the minimal essential condition for formal learning to occur.”

Finn’s (1998) model provides a clear understanding of the importance of engagement to student “connectedness” to school; however, it provides only a limited understanding of how the work that students are expected to complete affects their perceptions of or the reality of their engagement in the learning process. This also follows with studies conducted by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) which focuses more on the extracurricular and co-curricular experiences that students undergo as the determining factor in student-school engagement.

Levels of participation have been shown to increase with age, require greater involvement, and imply a stronger internal locus of control. These levels begin with teacher-initiated instruction and move to student-initiated instruction, participation in out-of-school activities, and participation in school governance (Finn, 1989). Duffy et al.
(2003) found, however, that increased participation is associated with better performance throughout high school. Finn (1989) and Duffy (2003) suggests that increased participation is associated with better performance in high school, but the research does not suggest that this can easily be transmitted into the classroom setting.

Norris, Pignal and Lipps (2003) expanded Finn’s definitions of engagement as children’s behavioral involvement and emotional identification with the social and academic realms of school (p. 27). Within this framework, academic engagement includes dealings with teachers, curriculum and school governance. Belonging is defined as a student’s perceived needs and the school offerings, perceptions of being cared for and respected. Valuing academics is an endorsement of the goals of the school and views of the importance and relevance of academic achievement. Social engagement is the identification and behavioral involvement with the social aspects of school including informal out of school activities, relationships with members of the school, extracurricular activities, and teacher contacts out of school. Valuing is holding beliefs that have been socially involved and displaying an interest in the social life of the school.

Fredricks, et. al (2004) identified three components of engagement in the research literature: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement. These specific components of engagement have been studied vigorously and have been evidenced by specific measurements of the educational process. The first component of engagement in school is behavioral; this is evidenced by the academic and extracurricular participation of students. Emotional engagement is marked by feelings of belongingness, frustration, boredom, interest and satisfaction as well as student-teacher relations and support. This area has also been studied as psychological engagement (Appleton, et. al,
2006). The third component is cognitive engagement; this is seen in the investment a student makes to school and its tasks.

**Measures of Student Engagement**


The Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, and Paris (2005) three-factor model is comprised of three overlapping dimensions: emotional engagement, behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement School success was defined as achievement and positive behaviors. These three factors were used because the researchers felt they encompassed the major factors in why and how a student would become successful in school.

Fredricks, et. al. (2004) also suggested that these factors represented the mind (cognitive), the heart (emotional) and the body (behavioral), which also provided an additional link to engagement. Prior research concluded that it is possible that the emotional engagement component precedes the cognitive and behavioral engagement components, while the cognitive and behavioral engagement components have a greater effect on academic success. According to Fredricks, et. al (2004), engagement is
important because an increase in engagement leads to improvements in students’ academic performance, promote school attendance, and inhibit risky youth behaviors.

Additionally, Fredricks, et. al., (2004) discuss specific ways to promote student engagement. Support from adults, challenging and interesting tasks, adequate structure, support for autonomy, opportunities to learn with peers and opportunities for active learning all contribute to a student’s likelihood of becoming more engaged in school. Implementation of enhanced engagement through actions on the part of school staff and other interested parties include mentoring, community service, academic tutoring and life skills training. To summarize, this model suggests that engagement employs a multidimensional construct where emotional engagement includes interests, values and overall emotions; cognitive engagement employs motivation, effort and strategy; and behavioral engagement includes aspects of work and following rules and principles.

**Behavioral Engagement.** Behavioral engagement includes positive conduct, involvement in academic-related activities, and participation in school-related activities such as sports or debate (Finn, 1993; Finn, et. al., 1995). When a student is fully engaged in school, he does more than merely show up to class; he contributes positively to the school, not just in the classroom and through attitude, but also through school-related activities that are not necessarily academic-based. Student behavior can be a very strong predictor of school achievement as specific behaviors such as attendance and completing assignments on time directly impact the grading system. Previous research has found a positive relationship between behavioral engagement and achievement outcomes (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Marks, 2000) and a negative relationship between
behavioral engagement and discipline problems (Finn et al., 1995) and dropping out (Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995). Additionally, Finn (1993) found a strong positive relationship between participation and school achievement, including the fact that the resulting positive impact was greater when the student engaged in a high degree of participation rather than a more moderate degree of participation. Voelkl (1997) also found a relationship between participation and student achievement.

**Cognitive Engagement.** Cognitive engagement is the psychological “investment in learning…self-regulation, or being strategic” (Fredricks et al., 2004) about the approach used in learning academic material. Again, engagement demands a level of effort in order to be realized. Specifically, engagement causes the student to participate in the learning activity, one that is purely cognitive and may not manifest itself on an emotional level, nor is it measured through purely behavioral means. Engagement may also include perceptions and beliefs (Jimerson et al., 2003). A student may observe a learning activity and then reflect upon his or her perceptions of the results, thus investing time and effort into considering what he or she just experienced. This reflection then shapes his or her belief system and could break down limiting or naïve paradigms.

Researchers argue that cognitive engagement is difficult to measure because it does not always manifest itself in a form like a behavior, nor can one assume that attendance or participation yields cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement could manifest itself in various forms, such as positive reaction to constructive criticism or placing a high value placed upon learning. Ultimately, it is an internal mechanism that
can affect school performance, as seen by the positive relationship between cognitive engagement and achievement (Boekarts, et. al, 1991; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

**Emotional Engagement:** Finn (1989) defined it as feeling important in the school, or in other words, a feeling of belonging. If the student feels as though he belongs in the school and that he is a part of the educational system, he is more likely to place effort on improving his situation and becoming successful. This sense of belonging may affect not just academic work but also interest levels in extra-curricular activities. Fredricks, et.al. (2004) described emotional engagement as positive and negative reactions to classmates, teachers, academics and the school. Emotional engagement could also be defined as a feeling of connection to a school, including academic performance, school culture, and the interpersonal relationships between the student and other students, as well as teachers and staff (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007).

Although not a lot of research has been done linking educational outcomes and emotional engagement, Finn (1989) and Newman (1981) found that low emotional engagement impacted students' decisions to drop out of school because of social isolation and feelings of estrangement. Feelings of separation from the school and other kids tend to decrease the value placed upon these interactions and their consequences. Fine (1991) found emotional engagement to be a protective factor in helping at-risk students stay in school. By feeling attachment and by creating an emotional investment, students place value upon and commit to outcomes such as their grade point average and test scores. Additionally, emotions have been specifically linked to student engagement: “positive
emotions during school were associated with higher levels of student engagement and negative emotions with lower levels of engagement” (Reschly, et. al. 2008).

**The Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly (2006) four-factor model.**

The Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, and Paris (2005) three-factor model was used as a precursor to a more complex and explanatory model: the four-factor model. The Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly (2006) four-factor model contains the following components: affective engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement and academic engagement. This four-factor model includes academic engagement component that the three-factor model ignores. Academic engagement refers to activities and goals such as course credits, homework completion, and the time in which the student remains on task and not distracted.

While both academic engagement and behavioral engagement are observable, cognitive engagement and affective engagement remain latent and are often difficult to measure. For the purposes of their study, Appleton et al. (2006) used self-report methods to measure the cognitive and affective engagement components. They used an instrument called the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) to gather data reported by students in the four areas presented in their model (Appleton et al., 2006).

The SEI instrument aims for measuring student engagement, and its structure suggests that these domains are both observational and psychological. For example, academic engagement and behavioral engagement are observed through student achievement and behavioral measures (i.e., risk scores, number of office referrals,
suspensions, etc.), while affective engagement and cognitive engagement are measured through a psychological instrument.

**Hazel’s model of student school engagement.**

A third model of student engagement theorized that there is a multi-dimensional biophysical model that underlines engagement. Hazel, et. al (2008) argued for “a multi-dimensional meta-construct representing a student’s internally and externally mediated affiliation with and investment in schooling…[as] a bio psychosocial phenomena, occurring in and responding to environmental contexts within a developmental trajectory.” Given that engagement was considered to be multi-dimensional and comprised of many different attributes and behaviors, and were measured by assessing students’ aspirations, sense of belongingness and productivity.

**Belongingness.** Belongingness is a concept closely related to engagement as students are invested in their school when they feel as though they belong to the school. Wentzel & Asher (1995) theorize that belongingness is an important component of emotional engagement and there is evidence to suggest that it can indirectly effect achievement (Jennings, 2003; Osterman, 2000; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Finn (1989) defined belonging as a feeling of being important, and that belonging is essentially a student’s identification with the school. (Identification has often been referred to as a component of emotional engagement). The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) also included belonging as a descriptor of engagement (Finlay, 2006), referring to it as affective reactions in the classroom, attitudes towards the school and teachers, and
student identification with the school. Given attributes such as attitudes and identification, it is likely that students’ perceptions of their levels of belonging could have a strong impact on their academic achievement. The components that comprised belongingness were peer relationships, school staff relationships, and school membership.

All of the research studies conducted on belongingness show a correlation between student perceptions of engagement and their perception of achievement. However, as suggested in the previous paragraph, Wentzel & Asher (1995) believe that the relationship is indirect and further point out in their research that emotional engagement does not necessarily lead to academic success. Their research does point to stronger student-teacher relationships in situations where students feel a high level of emotional engagement, which could lead to an increased willingness for students to complete assignments given by teachers. However, this does not necessarily lead to increased student achievement. Finlay (2006) also suggests that high levels of belongingness might not lead to an increase in academic success; however, this research does point out that it is more likely to lead to academic success than in classrooms with little or no emotional engagement.

Aspirations. Aspiration is described as a student’s value placed upon school. The student believes that school is worthwhile and invests time and energy into being academically successful. Aspirations can also be referred to as “a student’s appraisal of the worthwhileness of an education, [and] its utility to his or her future” (Hazel et al., 2009). In a study by Pike and Kuh (2005), they found that academic engagement was positively related to educational aspiration. Educational aspiration was defined as the intention to
enroll for an advanced degree. Aspirations and includes a student’s investment, goals and family and community support.

**Productivity.** Productivity is a drive to achieve success in the academic endeavor. Hazel et al. (2009) described it as effort, persistence and the willingness to work. Although productivity may be considered an outcome, for this paper, productivity was considered to be the energy exerted by students in their attempts to concentrate and be attentive to their studies. It can be operationalized by paying attention and putting forth a good effort to study for their classes. In a study by Kuh and Hu (2001), they directly referred to engagement in their definition of productivity: “the combination of student engagement in educationally purposeful activities and the gains they make in a range of desired outcomes of college.” Productivity’s components included: compliance, meta-cognition and effort.

**Qualitative Research on Engagement**

One of the major pitfalls in this research study is the lack of validated qualitative research into student engagement. As this is a growing topic of interest, most of the research has centered on quantitative methods using the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), which was developed as an extension of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which focuses on engagement in higher education.

Harris (2008) conducted a phenomenographic investigation of teacher conception of student engagement, citing that “educational stakeholders are concerned with the high
levels of student disengagement, evidenced by early school leaving, poor student behavior, and low levels of academic achievement.”

Caram and Davis (2005) conducted a qualitative study using student interviews in a suburban district in North Carolina. Based on their findings, students identified ten effective teaching strategies that aided academic engagement. Most of the strategies focused on creating a classroom with open dialogue and the promotion of high-level questioning.

Parn (2006) used classroom observation to investigate student engagement with special interest on behavioral engagement. The study focused on student posture, thinking, responsibility, participation and readiness as factors in engagement levels. In addition to the classroom observations, Parn (2006) also used student self-assessment to compare her perceptions of student engagement with the students self-reports.

**Differing Methodologies in the Study of Engagement**

Much of the research that has been conducted on student engagement has been prepared through quantitative methods using the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE). This annual survey utilized by high school across the United States focuses on Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement, Social/Behavioral/Participatory Engagement and Emotional Engagement with a series of 100 closed-response questions and one open response questions (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). The results of the most recent administration of the HSSSE shows a systemic issues across the nations with regard to student engagement and perceptions of academic achievement and perceptions of belongingness in the school setting.
Linnebrink & Pintrick (2003) used the quantitative data presented in the study to suggest a relationship between self-efficacy beliefs in student engagement and learning in the classroom. In the study, they determined that students who identified themselves as disengaged in their learning and the learning process were less likely to promote their own well-being in the educational setting.

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) used data acquired from the 2008 HSSSE to suggest a relationship between the economic well-being of the United States and the student engagement.

Smith and Cardaciotto (2011) conducted a comparative investigation of two classrooms, one an active learning condition focused on engagement and the other a content review condition taught in a traditional manner. Both of the classes were scheduled back-to-back with a random sample of students of similar gender and ethnicities. The researchers hypothesized that the student in the active learning condition would report greater engagement and academic achievement (as measured by retention) than their counterparts in the content review condition. As predicted, student in the active learning group reported greater retention and engagement as compared to their counterparts.

**Summary**

Research presented in this literature review has shown that there are factors with regards to student engagement that correlate with withdrawal (physical and emotional) from school. Research has also shown that student engagement has a positive relationship, not only with school completion, but also with academic success. Typically,
students who are engaged in learning have higher levels of achievement and complete their high school educations and students who are alienated or disengaged tend to fail and ultimately drop out. The validity of this study can be substantiated by past research that has supported the relationship between student achievement and engagement. Most of these studies have been quantitative in nature; however the studies that conducted through qualitative methods have provided a richer explanation of the relationship between engagement and academic success. This study adds further support to this assertion.

Understanding perceptions of engagement by teachers and students can provide additional support to the need for student engagement. Research can suggest causal factors for the lack of academic success and disengagement; however, student perception data may provide the answers as to what contributes to and detracts from their success. The research that is outlined in Chapter 3 offers an additional opportunity to determine whether or not engagement has an influence on student academic achievement.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the relationship between students’ perceived cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement and the perception of academic achievement (learning) by teachers and students in an urban high school social studies course. Over the past several years, educational leaders and researchers have tried to address a number of issues in public education, including low academic achievement, increasing student drop-out rates and the decline of positive perception of schools in general. As a result, there has been increasing research done on the levels of engagement that students experience during their scholosing. Much of the research has focused on how students are cognitively, behaviorally (socially), and emotionally engaged in school. Often, students and schools that are described a “at risk” are found to have lower levels of student engagement (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). This fact has been the foundation for the research in this area.

Student engagement has become a focus in educational settings as researchers and practitioners attempt to find solutions to declines in student academic achievement. This study was conducted in order to assess whether engagement effects student achievement, based on the perceptions of teachers and students in two United States History classrooms. The study focused on student engagement as described by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004). Fredricks, et. al. consider three key aspects of engagement: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. The cognitive engagement domain assesses student
motivation, learning goals and effort in their learning. Behavioral engagement is associated with positive conduct, including cooperative and autonomous participation. Emotional engagement focuses on the affective reactions of students in the learning environment or what the student values and are interested in.

**Research Design**

This study was completed using two qualitative methods: (1) observation of the instructional practices in two classrooms to offer a descriptive overview of the level of engagement and (2) interviewing two teachers and six students about their experiences in their classroom. This study is of particular significance as it seeks to determine whether engagement and academic achievement are related based on the personal perceptions of teachers and students.

The teachers are social studies instructors currently teaching at least one class of United States History. The six students are in one of the two identified classrooms. The researcher, with assistance from the teacher and evidence of achievement selected student participants based on their academic achievement as identified by their performance in their respective United States History class. Teachers identified students for participation based on their success in the class. No special consideration was made with regards to gender, race or ethnicity in this study.

At the conclusion of the study, the evidence is offered to support the notion that student engagement is a primary factor in student achievement in the United States History classrooms. If the evidence supports this idea, the focus on classroom instruction could change from the primary goal of knowledge and skill acquisition (in the form of
teaching and learning state or nationally mandated standards) to a focus on how to employ the methods necessary to engage students in their learning with the goal of improving student achievement. This research can potentially extend or redefine the expectations for pre-service teachers training, as well as those for educators currently in the field. Additionally, teacher evaluation/observations may be restructured to assess the educator’s ability to engage students beyond the dissemination of knowledge, particularly in the study of history.

**Qualitative Paradigm: Phenomenological Study**

Qualitative research is a term for investigative methodologies described as ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological, field, or participant observer research. It emphasizes the importance of looking at variables in the natural setting in which they are found. Interaction between variables is important and the interviewer is an integral part of the investigation. This differs from quantitative research which attempts to gather data by objective methods to provide information about relations, comparisons, and predictions and attempts to remove the investigator from the investigation (Key, 1997). For the purpose of this study a qualitative method, known as phenomenology was used.

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that focuses on identifying and mapping the perceptions that individuals or groups of people hold about the phenomena in their world (Matron & Pong, 2005). It developed in Sweden in the 1970s and is now used across the globe, especially in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and Australia. Phenomenological studies use a range of data collection methods including interviews, written responses, observations, focus groups, drawings, artifacts, and historical
documents (Bruce, 1996). However, all data collection processes must allow participants to give open-ended responses that contain sufficient depth so participant perceptions can be identified (Bowden, 1996).

Phenomenological studies differ from other qualitative approaches as it focuses on the collective understandings of groups and does not make claims about the positions held by individual participants. It does not attempt to assert that participants ‘hold’ specific perceptions, but instead gathers evidence to illustrate the range of perceptions present within the population under study. Participants may articulate more than one perception as their ways of thinking about a concept frequently changes as they discuss it within a range of contexts (Matron & Pong, 2005). Since most phenomenological studies do not use techniques such as member checking to ensure that research has been conducted in the rigorous manner required, each study must outline key theoretical principles and explain data collection methods and processes of analysis to establish validity and reliability (Campbell, 2010).

Studies of student engagement have often focused on the easily observable aspects of student engagement. That stated, most research has been focused on concepts, such as “time on task” as a measure of student engagement. (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Tools, such as the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), are designed to illicit quantitative data based on student perceptions of engagement. Fewer studies have examined qualitative indicators of student engagement. A phenomenological study offers greater explanation of the data that is typically drawn from quantitative studies of student engagement. Phenomenology does offer ways of understanding experiences that other research methodologies cannot address and thus may offer meaning to the data collected.
“In contrast to the scientific method it is both poetic and interpretive but those working from an emancipatory view of the role of research express dissatisfaction that it does not go beyond interpretation; it does not become emancipatory. Research needs to do more than offer understanding about human experience” (Campbell, 2010)

**Data Collection Procedure**

For this study, structured interviews were conducted and the data analyzed for each of the participants. Students and teachers were interviewed to determine the emotional, behavioral and cognitive engagement experienced in their classrooms. The researcher conducted classroom observations and interviews of teacher and student participants. Eight classroom observations (four per classroom) in each of two teacher participants’ classrooms occurred over a period of two months. Each classroom observation was followed by a brief interview of the teachers and students to assess their attitudes and perceptions about student engagement during the observation period. This information was analyzed to determine what instructional practices contributed to an increase in student engagement and thus improvement in learning.

Experienced researchers and experts in the field of qualitative research see self-discovery as essential to learning about qualitative research; however, there is an understanding that researchers must be aware of their biases, blind spots and cognitive limitation in order to advance theoretical knowledge (Mehta, 2002). Dentin (1989, p. 12) states, “the notion of how one’s self influences one’s research is generally the beginning of the discussion on the issue of bias in research.”
In order to mitigate the potential bias that may arise during the acquisition of information during the study, the researcher utilized skills acquired during previous qualitative studies courses to decrease the effects of subjectivity. The researcher began this reflective process by acknowledging potential biases, including the suggestion that engagement is an important factor in student achievement and that educators (namely those who participated in this study) have the ability to effect student engagement. Additionally, the coding process that used during the study aided in the objectivity of the research study as offered clear procedures for data analysis. The researcher also paid great care to use the structured questions during initial interview to limit any biases that may arise due to an answer given by a study participant.

**Interview Questions**

Interview questions used for this study were based on the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE). This instrument is designed to investigate the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of high school students about their work, with the primary purpose of helping high schools explore, understand and improve student engagement (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Although the questions on the HSSSE are typically given in a pen and paper survey format, the nature of the questions allows for open-ended discussion-based questions of sufficient depth so participant perceptions can be identified.

**Initial Teacher Interview Questions**

1. How do you engage the students in your classroom?
2. Can you define cognitive, behavioral/social and emotional engagement?
3. Describe your interactions with students. How do they differ in their quality, time, and focus?
4. Describe the opportunities that you offer your students for collaboration.
5. Describe the feedback that you give your students on a regular basis.
6. Describe the behavior and affective qualities of students who you would describe as engaged in your classroom.
7. Describe the types of academic work that you think are most effective for student learning.

**Initial Student Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Can you define engagement as it relates to your work in United States History?
3. Describe the kinds of academic work you are engaged in your United States History course.
4. How often do you ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion?
5. Describe opportunities for collaboration that you experience in class.
6. Describe your behavior and emotions when you are engaged in your learning.
7. Describe the academic work that you believe is most effective for your learning.

**Post-Observation Teacher Questions**

1. Were your students cognitively, behaviorally and emotionally engaged in your observed lesson?
2. What evidence do you have that your students were engaged in the lesson?

**Post-Observation Student Questions**

1. Were you engaged in your work during the class period?
2. What evidence supports your engagement?
3. With reference to this specific event in class, explain how you were engaged with your learning?

Although all of the questions listed were asked of each of the participants, follow-up questions were asked during the interview in order to clarify points or to extend questions. As these additional questions arose, the researcher used the information to clarify questions prior to the next interview.
Study Context

The study was conducted in a high school that is located in an urban area with a population of 1451 students and 102 teachers. There are 332 students enrolled U.S. History. The school is organized around a modified A/B. Students are enrolled in at least six classes and each student has a math, English, social studies and science course over the school term. Additionally, students may be enrolled in fine arts or athletics courses. For the purpose of this study, all students were enrolled in United States History as their year-long social studies course. None of the study participants were scheduled for Advanced Placement United States History, International Baccalaureate or on an alternative schedule.

Of additional note is the lack of success that students at this high school have had on the South Carolina End of Course (EOC) Test in United States History. The most recent test results show a 55% pass rate on the EOC, with no students scoring above a “B” on the exam. This test counts for 20% of a students’ final grade. It is not uncommon for high school social studies student to complain of boredom and dis-engagement in the curriculum. Many students cite a disconnect between the content expected and their interest. This phenomenon is also seen in United States History courses.

The school district recently experienced organizational change due to a change in leadership. The former superintendent’s had a stated goal of increasing student engagement in all classes by 75% over a period of two years. Although a new superintendent is leading the district, she has continued a focus on student learning and increasing student engagement. Teachers and administrative staff are continuing to
participate in professional development to accomplish this goal; however, the focus now centers on creating engaging experiences to support the Common Core Standards.

The building level principal, assistant principal for curriculum and the social studies department chair were briefed on the process and procedures of the study. Each of these individuals had an opportunity to voice any questions or concerns about the nature of the study. Modifications were made based on the discussion with each of these individuals. Once the participant selection process has concluded, the researcher met with each of the study participants in an informal meeting to describe the study and address any concerns that the participant may have about the process, confidentiality or their individual rights with regards to the study. This assisted the researcher in developing a working relationship with the study participants. None of the study participants felt uncomfortable with their participation in the study; however, the research provided an opportunity for teacher or student participants to opt-out at any point. If a participant chose to leave the project, an alternate would have been determined and the same procedure would have been used to develop a working relationship with the new participant.

**Ethical Protection of Participants**

To reduce the risk to subjects of the study, anonymity was ensured and the data that collected did not have any indicators to identify the individual. Each participant was assigned a number in order to connect data; however, this information was only available to the researcher. It is impossible to identify an individual based on demographic factors as the only information included was age and ethnicity.
In planning the study, the researcher adhered to the following ethical standards as outlined by the American Psychological Association (1982).

a. The researcher made a careful evaluation of the ethical acceptability of the study, including approval by the institutional IRB.

b. The researcher considered whether or not the study placed any subjects at risk.

c. The researcher retained the responsibility of ensuring ethical practice in research.

d. The researcher established a clear and fair agreement with the research participants.

e. The researcher protected the participants from mental and physical harm, discomfort or dancer. If and when the researcher recognized undesirable consequences for the individual, the researcher removed or corrected the consequences.

f. The researcher provided the participant with information on the nature of the study in advance of participation.

Each participant received an informed consent document which outlines the study process and procedures, as well as any potential risks that may be involved in participation. Individuals who chose to participate had the option of leaving the study for any reason they deemed necessary. Participants who choose to leave were not penalized in any way. If a participant feels uncomfortable with the process, he/she may express their discomfort to the researcher without consequence. The school approved the study and subsequently agreed not to penalize the students nor the teachers in any way based on the data that is gathered.
Participant Selection Process

Since the nature of a phenomenological study focuses on individual perceptions of teachers and students who have found success in their United States History course, the selection of the student participants was decided based on academic achievement as determined by teacher participants. In order to facilitate the process, the researcher identified all of the United States history teachers at the school site to determine the teacher participants who are best suited for participation. Each potential participant received a brief initial interview in their classroom. The researcher used this information to select two teachers to participate in the study. The selection was based on the researcher’s perception of each teacher’s openness based on the results of the interview.

The limited number of participants was balanced by the amount of information that the researcher gathered through the interviews. The researcher expects to gain a great deal of information from each of the participants in order to ensure sufficient depth of to analyze participant perceptions and to offer assumptions about those perceptions. It is expected that each interview lasted at least twenty minutes, giving each participant ample time to share their thoughts. Pseudonyms are used in place of the real names of all participants.

Teacher Participants

When selecting the teachers for this study, my first consideration was to recruit who had at least three years of experience in a social studies classroom in order to avoid challenges often faced by entry level teachers. It was also important to identify teachers
who, based on student data, were successful in instructing and assessing students. Additional information gathered from the Assistant Principal for Curriculum and Instruction at the site offered insight into the United States History instructors best suited for the study. Once the teachers were selected, I met with each of them individually to explain the purpose of the study and to determine their interest in participating in the research. The teachers selected agreed to participate in the interview process and also allow for classroom observations during the study.

The first teacher participant, Ms. Brown has thirty-eight years of experience teaching high school social studies; in addition, she spent two years in a middle school setting. She has had experience teaching general level, college preparatory, Honors and Advanced Placement students over the course of her career. Most recently, she has been a part-time teacher of Advanced Placement and general level United States History. She also taught a number of social studies electives; however, her preference is history instruction. She is held in great regard by her administration for her ability to work with struggling learners. She has taught in six schools in three districts during her career. She is a self-described “loud-mouth” teacher who injects humor in class in order to get increase student interest in the content. Although she has great success with students at all levels, she believes that she does not reach under-performing students to an acceptable degree. She also believes the focus should be on the individual socio-emotional needs of students as opposed to just the content standards. That stated, in each interview session she points out that the focus on academic standards over the past few decades has not necessarily served the interest of many of her students who need specific assistance in areas unrelated to acquisition of knowledge.
The second teacher participant, Ms. Caldwell has six years of experience teaching high school social studies, all of which have been completed in her current environment. During her tenure, she has taught various World History and United States History courses to college preparatory, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate students. As with Ms. Brown, Ms. Caldwell is held in high regard by the administrative team. The Assistant Principal for Curriculum and Instruction describes her as a “calm and reassuring presence” in the classroom and she is distinguished as a teacher who does not raise her voice, yet has excellent classroom management skills. The success rate of her students on the state mandated United States History End-of-Course Exam has increased for each administration over the past three years. Ms. Caldwell believes that she still has a great deal to learn about effective instruction and she participates in professional development on new instructional strategies regularly. As a result, she has employed new project based learning experiences for her students in recent years. She has found this to be particularly effective for her student population.

Both teacher participants self-describe as student-focused and believe that their relationship with their students is the most significant factor in their academic success. They are masters of their subject matter and utilize multiple instructional strategies to encourage student learning. By all accounts they are held in high esteem by their colleagues. This school term both teachers are teaching only United States History content, including a United States History preparation course that is taught only to 10th grade students.
Student Participants

The six students identified for this study were selected based on their enrollment in Ms. Brown and Ms. Caldwell’s class and their academic success in the classroom. During the initial teacher interviews, Ms. Brown and Ms. Caldwell were asked to select three high performing students to participate in the study.

Mrs. Brown's Students:

Student A: Fiona

Fiona is a 16-year old Black female. She is a high school junior who plans to attend college to pursue a career in computer technology upon graduating from high school in two years. She enjoys school and identifies English and social studies as her favorite subjects. She is self-described as out-going and friendly with everyone. She admits that this gets in the way of her learning from time to time. She states that she is easily engaged by teacher because she likes to learn most subjects. Fiona is a student-athlete.

Student B: Ophelia

Ophelia is a 16-year old Black female. She is a high school junior who enjoys the arts. Upon graduating from high school, she plans to move to a large city, preferably Los Angeles, California or New York, New York to pursue a career in dance. She is undecided about going to college at this time. She enjoys school, especially courses in the arts. She admits that school is sometimes difficult for her and that she requires one-on-one attention from teachers at times. She admits that she is not easily engaged in
school unless the course has a lot of activity. She enjoys teachers and classes that allow a lot of interaction.

**Student C: Nicholas**

Nicholas is a 16-year old Black male. He is a high school junior who plans to attend college in two years and would like to pursue a degree in engineering. He enjoys social studies, but would prefer to spend more time in his mathematics classes. He makes good grades in classes that he enjoys, but often struggles in classes that are not “fun.” He had issues with his behavior in the past and attributes that to boredom and disinterest in the content.

**Mrs. Caldwell’s Students:**

**Student D: Alexander**

Alexander is a 17-year old Hispanic male who self-describes as a “typical nerd-boy.” He loves science and music and would like to pursue a career as a neurologist upon completion of high school. Alexander is quiet and prefers to do his work without much interaction from others although he enjoys some types of collaborative assignments.

**Student E: Jasmine**

Jasmine is a 16-year old Black female. She is a high school junior who plans to attend college after high school, but is undecided about her career after that point. Historically, she has not done well in social studies courses, but this year she is doing
better than her previous experiences. Jasmine self-describes as a good student but admits that she needs interactivity in order to learn.

**Student F: Barbara**

Barbara is a 16-year old White female. She is a high school junior who describes herself as “hard-working, out-going and always ready to learn.” She would like to go to college and medical school after graduating from high school and study to become a cardiothoracic surgeon. The field of social studies is her favorite, particularly the study of history. She describes herself as an active participant in class discussions; however, she does not like to ask questions. Barbara is also an athlete and this takes up a lot of time, especially during the spring semester.

None of the students selected for the study participate in the International Baccalaureate program or any of the other magnet programs at the school nor have they been identified as Talented and Gifted by the district. All of the student participants and their parents signed an informed consent document to ensure their understanding of the process. All students agreed to be honest in their comments.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Since this study is phenomenological in nature, the researcher used all of the data collected during the study. This data included transcripts from observations and interview of the classrooms, teacher and student participants. The major themes identified through the study were used to draw conclusions. The additional information
is used in Chapter 5 to outline areas for further study. The data was transcribed and an initial analysis conducted within 48 hours of any interview or observation. The researcher coded all of the information gathered prior to the next interview or observation.

At the conclusion of all of the interviews and observations, the data were analyzed for commonalities, as well as for discrepant information. The study focused on the Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) model of student engagement and data coded from the observations and interviews used criteria as follows:

Table 3.1: Observation and Interview Coding System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic</td>
<td>Describing the work students do and the ways students go about doing their work</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral/Participatory/Social</td>
<td>Describing the ways in which students interact within the school community</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Engagement</td>
<td>Describing how students feel about where they are in school</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments made by participants, as well as data collected during classroom observations were coded based on whether they exhibit or express cognitive, behavioral or emotional engagement. This information was then subdivided into the categories for analysis.
The data collection process was conducted as follows:

1. Initial Teacher Interviews
2. Preliminary Student Interviews
3. Classroom Observations (4 per classroom over two months)
4. Post-Observation Teacher Interview (following each observation)
5. Post-Observation Student Interviews (following each observation)

**Figure 3.1 Data Collection Process**

**Observations**

Observation is defined as “the systematic description of events, behaviors and artifacts in the social setting choses for study” (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Participant observation is useful in allowing the researcher an opportunity to learn about
the activities of individuals in the natural setting and can additionally insight for sampling and interview selections (Dewalt, 2002)

Natural observations were conducted with the purpose of examining student engagement in a typical social studies classroom with no experimental treatment. I recorded and events and dialogue for data analysis. I had no interaction with students during the observation period; however, at times it was necessary to move around the room in order to document conversations during small group activities. I did not teach or give assistance to students during the observation, even when approached by a student. It is important to note that both instructors informed students that I would be visiting their classroom at certain time during the semester as per school policy. Steps were taken to minimize the observer effect. Between the two classes, I was able to observe six 90 minute blocks and two 75 minute blocks for a total of 690 minutes.

**Interviews**

Interviews provide researchers an opportunity to gain rich data and to make meaning in qualitative research (Warren, 2002). In particular, interviews allow the researchers to obtain important information from participants that are not easily observable or that allows for greater insight into the personal feelings or beliefs of the individual. Kvale (1996) defines qualitative research interviews as a researcher’s “attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples’ experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations.” Patton (1990) identifies three basic type of qualitative interviewing for research or evaluation: (1) the informal conversational interview, (2) the interview guide approach,
and (3) the standardized open ended interview. The interview guide approach was used for the purposes of this study. The interview guide approach is described as the most widely used method for qualitative interviewing. In this approach, the interview prepares questions, topics or issues to cover, but may vary wording and order of the question to some degree. This allows the interview to remain conversational as opposed to a rigid adherence to a set of questions that does not allow for elaboration. It is important to note that this method can limit the inclusion of “important and salient topics” as the research follows the predetermined line of questioning.

Interviews with the teacher and student participants were necessary to gain an understanding of the reason for and to gain insight into the observed behaviors of both the teacher and student participants. The interviews were structured; however, there was flexibility in order to allow participants to explore their thought on the referenced behaviors. All interviews were conducted individually so that participants could express their thoughts without any perception or fear of judgment, repercussion of embarrassment. Teacher interviews were conducted the same day or the day after the classroom observations. Due to the nature of class schedules, most student interviews were not conducted the same day as the classroom observation; however, they were conducted within two days of the observation to ensure that events were still clear in their minds. The environment used for student interview, in particular, was selected to minimize distractions.
Discrepant information is included in Chapter 4 of the study as a phenomenological study allows for multiple perceptions to be evident in the research. Multiple perceptions are encouraged as they are presented in a particular context as expressed by the participant. Any discrepant information that does not fit the context set forth by is included in Chapter 5 as an area for future study.

Follow-up interviews were conducted to clear up any misconceptions as deemed necessary by the researcher. Since follow-up interviews presented additional data that may not have appeared in the initial interview, the researcher identified the new data as additional information based on the attempt to clarify information. If it is found that this information is added due to a lack of clarity in the researcher’s presentation of the question to the interviewee, this is also noted in Chapter 4.

Data from the teacher interview was collected and transcribed within 48 hours of each interview. The data was analyzed using the same coding system utilized in the student interview process (see Table 3.1). Follow-up interview may be conducted with teachers in order to clear up any misconceptions. Any information that is acquired in
subsequent follow-up sessions that were not presented in the initial interview was identified by the researcher as new data.

**Exploratory Study**

An exploratory study was not conducted prior to the implementation of this phenomenological study as the problem being research is clearly defined, as well as the method of data collection and the selection of the study subjects are suited to a phenomenological study. Information found in the HSSSE was used as the foundation for this study and as this instrument is used in many high schools in the nations, the researcher relied on the framework established by its use, as well as other research on student engagement.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH CONTEXT, DATA AND FINDINGS

The focus of this research study centers on a urban high school that serves 1451 students in grades 9-12. African American students comprise 68% of the student population, while White students represent 20%, Hispanic students represent 8%, Asian students represent 2%, and 2% are classified as “Other.” Over 50% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. The school has 102 teachers with additional staff in administrative roles (Five Year Strategic Plan, 2012-2014).

The school utilizes a modified alternating A/B Block schedule; most students meet classes every other day for 92 minutes per block for 2 semesters. In an attempt to increase enrollment, the school district has developed a number of magnet programs with open enrollment. In recent years, the school has struggled to maintain high academic achievement as measured by the state report card system. Due to the size of the school, class size is relatively low compared to other schools in the district. Additionally, the school is a recently received the International Baccalaureate World School designation.

The most recent state report card states a 63.8% on-time graduation rate and a 2.9% dropout rate. Eighty-three percent of teachers and 71% of students report satisfaction with the learning environment in 2013. Eight-seven percent of teachers and 77% of students report satisfaction with the social and physical environment. Despite positive growth in a number of significant factor areas, the school scored an “F” rating on the most recent Federal Accountability Rating System. The school administration, faculty,
parents and students are taking steps to improve their standing (SC Annual School Report Card Summary, 2013).

Course Context

United States History is a required course for all students. Most students who complete the course are in 11th grade or in their third year of high school. The course has state mandated content standards that require students to master content from the colonial period of United States History through the present day, as well as a requirement to complete an end of course test. State Department of Education requires that the end of course test (EOC) count as 20% of a student’s final grade in the course. The school’s pass rate on the end of course test over the past three years is as follows:

2011-2012 48.7%
2012-2013 54.9%
2013-2014 55.3%

During the interview process, both teachers voluntarily expressed concerns about the end of course examination specifically with regards to student engagement. Ms. Brown stated that:

“The EOC makes me feel like I don’t have time to stop and breathe. I am constantly on a hamster wheel trying to get students through the content so they may have a chance to keep up with what they need to know for the test. I used to do a lot more projects which student really liked, but now I have to do less of that in order to cover everything I need to for the students’ sake.”

Ms. Caldwell expressed a similar sentiment describing her inability to slow down at times when she knows that some students are not understanding the content to the depth she would like them during the lesson. Instead, she is forced to hold those students after class
or ask that they come in at another time in order to make sense of their misunderstandings.

Both teachers admitted to making choices about covering specific content in order to offer students more engaging activities from time to time. This also plays a role in instructional practices and strategies that they utilize. For example, Ms. Brown explains that she no longer shows full length films or documentaries to students, instead opting for shorter opportunities to show videos or showing films over an extended length of time (e.g. 20 minutes per day). This allows her to continue “pushing” content daily. The school’s administration is also concerned about the student success rate as it has an effect the school’s state report card rating. They have sought help from the district level to help teachers better prepare students for the examination with some success. The school also requires that all teachers who teach an EOC course meet regularly to discuss strategies to improve student success on exams.

In addition to concerns about the EOC examination both teachers also explained that many students are not interested in United States History as compared to other elective courses in the social studies, thus making it a difficult course to teach at times. Ms. Caldwell shared that many students see very little relevance in history because they are unable to make connections to their lives:

“At times I think students should be interested when I talk about historical events like—like— the historical events surrounding the creation of the federal tax codes in the early 20th century. Many of our students work, but I realize that they don’t care about taxes that may be taken from their paycheck or what it is used for. They care about how much money they have left to buy their prom dresses or to pay for the new tennis shoes they want. It realize it has to be my job to help them understand the consequences of past events and how it affects their lives.”
Although these preliminary comments and concerns expressed by Ms. Brown and Ms. Caldwell were not directly related to engagement, they both expressed that these issues get in the way of what they believe encourages student cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement.

It is important to note that there were multiple examples of both teachers denying students opportunities to “opt-out” of their learning. Students with their heads down or those who were not taking notes during lectures were addressed by each of the teachers as appropriate.

**Physical Classroom Environment and Engagement**

Research shows that physical environment can play a role in student engagement and given that the observation took place in the classroom setting, it is important to consider what, if any effect it might have on the students in the study.

Ms. Brown’s classroom environment is atypical for a social studies classroom as she is located in a science lab. Upon questioning the Assistant Principal at the site, I learned that this was due in part to her part time status, as well as the lack of space in the school due to student enrollment. Ms. Brown’s students are typically arranged in rows and are seated alphabetically. There is limited room for movement due to the space taken by laboratory seating and equipment; however, I observed Ms. Brown moving around the classroom through the class period. Although students are tightly organized, they appear to be comfortable; however, Ms. Brown explained that during group activities, students often request permission to leave the classroom to work in the hallway. Owing to close proximity of students, great care is taken during assessment.
activities to minimize dishonesty. Wall space is also limited; therefore, Ms. Brown does not have much content related stimuli available for students to view. Nineteen students were enrolled in the section of Ms. Brown’s course load used for this study.

In contrast, Ms. Caldwell’s’ classroom is typical of most social studies classrooms I have observed. Like Ms. Brown, her students are arranged in rows; however, the classroom arrangement was modified during two observations periods and her students commented that the desk were often rearranged to accommodate a particular activity. Although Ms. Caldwell had more room than Ms. Brown to navigate her classroom, she was not observed moving around her room as often as Ms. Brown; she tended to instruct from the front of the room and moved only to address individual student needs as necessary for instruction or disciplinary reasons. Twenty-one students were enrolled in the section of Ms. Caldwell’s course load used for this study.

A distinctive part of Ms. Caldwell’s classroom is the amount of visual content materials and student work posted in the room, particularly for a high school classroom. One example that supports emotional engagement is the use of a “Who Am I” wall that displayed her students’ personal description of their learning styles. This was a good indicator that Ms. Caldwell was concerned about her relationship with her students. During an interview, she commented that she had all of her students self-reflect on their learning styles at the beginning of the school term and that she used that information to differentiate instruction, determine student groups and to help determine the types of assignments that a particular class would enjoy.
Teacher Participant’s Definition of Engagement

During the initial interview, I sought to have the teachers explain their understanding of the term “engagement.” Ms. Brown broadly defined engagement as students “actively involved in their learning and participating in activities.” Ms. Caldwell offered specific requirements in her definition of engagement, including referencing students asking and answering questions, completing all assignments, being attentive and committed to doing a good job. I then shared the definition of the three engagement types—cognitive, behavioral, and emotional—that would be the focus of the observations and interviews during the study after each teacher identified their definition. This allowed me to set the context for the study and give the teacher an opportunity to express their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences about each of the terms. I asked each teacher if they could identify pedagogical choices that affect the three types of student engagement in their classrooms. Each teacher was able to give specific examples of how they use instructional strategies or procedures to engage students in each of the three areas. Specific examples from each teacher are presented in Table 4.1.
Table 4.1 Teacher Identification of Engagement Types in Instructional Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Brown</td>
<td>• Mandatory participation in activities through white-board activities; proof of learning with immediate feedback</td>
<td>• Establishing student roles; all students at some point over school term must act as a classroom teacher/facilitator</td>
<td>• Use of humor (particularly self-deprecating) to connect with students and build relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Caldwell</td>
<td>• Use of questioning and discussion throughout the lesson using opinion as the foundation; no wrong answer so no threat to participation</td>
<td>• Varying classroom routines to build novelty in experiences</td>
<td>• Building relationships and taking an interest in students interests outside of class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During subsequent interviews, both teachers expressed concern about identifying evidence of student engagement. Most of the concerns focused on proof of emotional engagement in their classroom, specifically with regards to external influences that could affect a students’ behavior on any given day. Ms. Caldwell commented after an observation period:

“Today was a difficult day for me. At the beginning of class it seemed that some students were not “connected” to learning and even resistant to some degree. It seemed to spread through the class by the end of the period. Things that I usually say and do to get the students “pumped” did not work and most of them behaved as if they did not care. I don’t think it had anything to do with me or the content of the lesson. Something must be going on outside of class today.”

Likewise, Ms. Brown also expresses at times the inability to get students to “laugh at my corny jokes” or to participate in an activity designed to “get them excited.” She explained that when this happens she usually gives up for the day and tries to reestablish the normal environment the next day.
Both teachers described cognitive engagement as the easiest engagement factor to control, especially in the history classroom. Through the use of varied instructional practices, including group work, the incorporation visuals (e.g. maps, charts, etc.), the use of technology and connecting the content to the students’ everyday life and experiences, the teachers believed that they could encourage their cognitive engagement. During a post-observation interview, Ms. Caldwell discussed two pictures that she showed students to analyze the differences between the Northern colonies and Southern colonies prior to the American Revolution. The first visual depicted a Northern gentleman and the second visual was of a Southern planter. Ms. Caldwell asked the students questions as follows:

“What differences do you see in each of these pictures?”

“Can you determine from the picture where these men lived during the period we are studying?”

“How do you know?”

Most students in the class eagerly responded to her questions citing specific references from the picture, as well as sharing information that they learned from previous class periods. During the post-observation interview, Ms. Caldwell explained that she found the use of visuals to be an extremely effective way to engage students, especially her struggling readers because they can identify important information through visuals. She also explained that in her experience as student learn more about modern times, they enjoy visual and audio references that are familiar to them from their everyday lives. It is important to note that although each teacher believed cognitive engagement was easy to control from their perspective (i.e. their ability to create
assignments to engage students thinking, thus learning), they both argued that it was at times difficult to observe in the traditional sense. It was only through the use of questioning or when a student completed an assignment that their cognitive engagement was evident.

When asked what was the most significant instructional practice used to engage students both teachers described the use of questioning and discussion techniques, as well as involving students as active participants in their learning to promote engagement. During observations, both teachers asked questions and encouraged discussions through the class period. Interestingly, most of the questions required answers beyond the basic fact-based, single-solution responses one might expect in a history class. In fact, most of the questions asked were open-ended, requiring students to offer minimally an explanation of their answer and in many cases a justification with evidence to support their response. Ms. Brown mentioned that she used questioning techniques to help student clarify their answers in most cases, but it stated that it could also be used to engage students in learning beyond the specific content information they need to know. She explained:

“Sometimes I ask students questions to challenge their thinking about a particular subject. The other day when we were discussing the Boston Tea Party and I challenged students by stating that everyone who participated should have been put to death for treason. Immediately, student hands went up and they wanted to share their thoughts. Many students offered their point of view suggesting that the colonist were justified in their behavior because of the ill-treatment by the British and other students explained that this would not be fair based on current laws. The discussion evolved into a unplanned debate with almost all of the students participating.”

Ms. Caldwell described and I observed similar experiences during the observations that substantiates that the use of questioning and discussion techniques
often leads to evidence of behavioral/social and emotional engagement by students. Many times during observations students would make comments such as, “I don’t believe that was right” or “My family would not believe in that.” Again this illustrates student’s emotional engagement with the content which could potentially lead to greater depth in their learning.

In contrast, both teachers also stated that it was important to avoid lecture whenever possible because it usually had a negative effect on student engagement. However, Ms. Brown also explained that she believed that she was a skilled storyteller from years of experience which allowed her lectures to be more engaging than most people would think. She joked during an interview, as well as during one of the classroom observations that she had lived through most of it (American History), so she was giving the students a first-hand account of what had happened.

For the purposes of the study, I acknowledged that Ms. Brown cautioned me that I might mistakenly observe at least one student, not a study participant, who seemed to be disengaged but she believed to be engaged. Although the student kept his head on his desk during most of my observations, he was performing well in her class. She also acknowledged one student who was also doing very well in her class but preferred not to participate in group or partner work. She explained that he is very quiet in front of his peers, but often visits with her during lunch or after school to ask questions or share his thought. She no longer requires him to participate in most of the group work, instead allowing him to work individually whenever possible. She believes that she is meeting his emotional needs with that decision. This validates research that suggests the need to
consider multiple factors when assessing student engagement as well as understanding that engagement is not easily observable in some cases.

**Student Data from Observations and Interviews**

Evidence from the observation of students and their subsequent interviews provided rich evidence of students’ engagement in each of the areas of focus for this study. All of the student participants were open and shared their thoughts and beliefs about how their engagement affected their learning and thus their academic achievement and success in the United States History course.

**Fiona**

As described in Chapter 3, Fiona is a 16-year old Black female who enjoys school, in particular the study of English and social studies. Upon first glance at Fiona, you see a bright-eyed and easy-going student. During the initial interview, she explained that although she enjoys her history course, she wished it did not require her to take notes or read; she prefers to just listen to what the teacher has to say. When questioned about what engages her most in her history course, she explained that she liked when the teacher tells a story or shows a movie. Upon further probing, she also explained that she enjoyed working in groups without the help of the teacher because she did not have to “always worry about having the correct answer.”

During my observations there was clear evidence of cognitive engagement by Fiona. She was often the first person in class to raise her hand to answer questions asked by the teacher, as well as volunteer to help classmates who did not understand the content
or had questions. On one such occasion, Ms. Brown asked a specific student in her class to answer the question, “Why might the Native Americans have been suspicious of these people who just showed up one day?” The student struggled to answer explaining that he did not understand what Ms. Brown was asking. Fiona responded by waving her hand and saying “I know, I know, let me help him.” Ms. Brown acknowledged her and said, “Go ahead.” Fiona responded as follows:

“What if someone came to your house and you did not invite them—they just came up in your house without your permission. You would be scared and wondering why they were there and what they were going to do. You would probably be mad and want to do something about it. The Indians (Ms. Brown interrupted and corrected her word choice) oh-yah Native American were probably scared, too. Especially if the people did not look like them.”

This response is evidence of Fiona’s cognitive engagement with the content as she not only answered the question, but she also brought personal relevance to the content. This is evidence of metacognition or the ability to think about her thinking, another sign of cognitive engagement. When asked about this interchange during the follow-up interview, Fiona explained that she actually remembered learning about this content in elementary school and that she understood that the Native Americans were not happy when Europeans came here. I followed up by asking why she related the content to someone visiting a home uninvited. She stated that was how she made sense of history. She explained that she believes that the best teachers do that in class so students do not have to figure it out on their own.

Behavioral engagement was also evident by Fiona’s attention, focus and participation in the classroom. Fiona typically asked question for clarification of content, as well as when seeking an answer to a specific questions. Fiona did not seem to be
easily distracted by her classmates, nor was she a distraction to other during instructional periods. She seemed to self-regulate her behavior and social interactions appropriately during small group and individual activities.

Admittedly, I struggled to find observable evidence of emotional engagement with all of the students in the study; however, Fiona was an exception in that she was a very vocal and excitable student. On several occasions during my observations, Fiona answered a question correctly or received a good grade on an assignment. Her reaction in all of these instances was to “peacock.” For example, after received a 100 on a pop quiz during a class period, she stood up near her desk and said, “I got a hundred, ya’ll, I got a hundred” and gave all of the students seated next to her high-fives. Although it was not a huge distraction to the class at that time, it took Ms. Brown several seconds to get her to calm down. When asked during her follow-up interview if this was her typical behavior when she received a good grade, she said, “No, but Ms. Brown is cool and I knew she would not get mad at me. I was also excited.”

When asked during follow-up interviews what would have made her more engaged, she always suggested that opportunities to work in a group would have made her learning better and increased her engagement. For example, Ms. Brown presented an activity to student requiring that they chart the compromises from the discussion of the United States Constitution during the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Fiona suggested that during that activity it would have been great if she could have asked her classmates for help. She stated, “I forgot a few things from the class discussion the day before that I would have remembered if I could have talked to Kayla. She remembers things that I
forget sometimes.” She went on to explain that she knows teacher cannot do that for a test, but assignments before a test would help her to learn.

Additionally, Fiona consistently made reference to enjoying the opportunities to share her thoughts and opinions in the class. She explained that she enjoyed when Ms. Brown asked student what they thought about event in history and allowed them to tell the class what they thought or believed. That stated, Fiona also expressed her frustration when this type of opportunity was limited due to student behavior. I did not witness any such negative situation during my observations; however, Fiona stated that a lot of the time Ms. Brown would have to stop class discussion because other students were not paying attention or not participating in the discussion. She explained that this only happened when there were discussion that happened during classroom lectures, not during activities like individual or group presentations.

**Ophelia**

Ophelia is a 16-year old Black female who prefers to study the arts, both acting and dance over other academic subjects. She admits that she struggles in most courses and has to work very hard to make good grades. When asked what engages her in the study of history, her answer was, “Nothing.” Upon further probing; however, she explained that she often needed the teacher to explain things in different ways and she also had to reread her notes and information from the textbook to understand what was going on in all of her social studies classes. Her parents expect her to make good grades and her participation in dance in and out of school is connected to her ability to keep her grades up.
Although there was observable evidence of cognitive engagement by Ophelia, it was very different from the other students in this study. Ophelia very seldom answered questions; however, she asked question of the teacher frequently. During one such period the Ms. Brown was reminding students of a discussion from the previous class period in which they discussed the causes of the American Revolution. Ms. Brown began by putting a PowerPoint slide up that outlined the grievances that Thomas Jefferson points out in the Declaration of Independence and stated:

Ms. Brown: Look at the list on this slide. What are some of the events that we talked about a couple of days ago is Jefferson talking about in the list? Several students raised their hands and offered answers. When Ophelia raised her hand Ms. Brown call on her.

Ophelia: I don’t understand what you mean when you say that events we discussed in the last class are on the list. I know we talked about taxation and I see that, but what about being fair and letting the colonist have their say.

Ms. Brown: Think for a second, Ophelia. First, why would it be important for Jefferson’s grievances to match the problems that the colonist had with the Great Britain?

Ophelia: Because they have to have a reason to fight against them, I think.

Ms. Brown: O.k. What on this list is related to taxation.

Ophelia: For imposing taxes on us without our Consent.

Ms. Brown: Very good, now about being fair—what on the list shows that Jefferson did not feel that the British were not being fair. Just choose one of the issues we discussed in class.

Ophelia: Maybe when he talked about making the colonist keep the soldiers in their house.

Ms. Brown: Exactly—do you see evidence of that on this list?

Ophelia and I discussed this interchange during our follow-up interview and explained that she asked questions in class so that she was sure that she understood before leaving school and studying.
More than any other study participant, Ophelia behavioral engagement was almost tangible. As I observed her in the classroom, her concentration was evident. From the moment she entered class, she was focused on what Ms. Brown was saying and seemed to block out everything else in her surroundings. When asked about this during a follow-up interview, she explained that she really needed to concentrate during class so you could understand before going home to study. She also explained that she usually liked to sit at the front of the classroom (her seat was situated near the middle of the classroom), but Ms. Brown had to move some students because “they talked to much.”

Ophelia was also the most open study participant when it came to expressing her levels of emotional engagement. When questioned about how emotional connected she was to the content, she explained that she was not connected in any way. Although she was performing well in class, she expressed that she did not enjoy studying history and really committed because if she did not do well it would affect other areas of her life. When asked what would make her more engaged in the learning process, Ophelia explained that she really enjoyed working in groups, but only when she really understood the content. She expressed fear at the thought of working with students when she might not have the answers, explaining that she did not want her classmates to think that she was stupid. When asked if this happened often, she explained that it did not, but she was always afraid that she was the person in her group that knew the least. Additionally, during the interviews, Ophelia talked about doing projects in United States History as positive. This seems to be a logical offshoot of her enjoyment of the arts. She stated:

“Ms. Brown has told us that we do not have a lot of time to do projects because of the OC test, but I wished we could because I usually do very good on projects. . . . On the project we did earlier this semester on the colonies we (her
group) put together a really neat portfolio that we made a 100 on. They usually let me do all of the drawing and coloring on the project.”

It might be significant to note that Ophelia was originally one of the most resistant students to share her thoughts at the beginning of the study; however, by the end final interview, she was willing to share her thought without hesitation.

Nicholas

Nicholas is a 16-year old Black male who prefers mathematics and science to social studies; however, he admits that he does well in all of his classes. During one of the interviews, Nicholas pointed out that he was very glad that his history class was scheduled for the afternoon and his Math and Science classes for the morning because he is not a morning person and he would probably not do as well as he did if he had history first thing in the morning. Based on my observations, he is a very opinionated student who wants to be heard on most issues in the class. In fact, during one class period he debated Ms. Brown on why it was important to learn about this “old stuff” explaining that he believed it was more important to learn about stuff going on right now. Ms. Brown explained that the class would eventually get to more recent events; however, it was important to learn what happened in the past so they could understand how it influenced the present. Nicholas was by far the most vocal study participant as evident by his contributions in the classroom and during the follow-up interviews.

During my observations, Nicholas’ cognitive engagement was evident by his willingness to answer and ask questions. He consistently raised his hands to address questions asked by Ms. Brown and his classmates. My observation location during his class was in close proximity to Nicholas and I also had the opportunity to hear him talk to students sitting near him who asked him questions when they were having problems.
understanding the content or missed something that Ms. Brown said during the lecture. He tended to offer additional explanation whenever he helped a classmate with an answer.

Nicholas’ participation in the class was a reflection of positive behavioral engagement; however, there was times when he seemed distracted or to daydream. When asked about this phenomenon during the follow-up interviews, he explained that this only happened when there were long periods of lecture without any time for discussion or interaction with his classmates or when Ms. Brown would repeat information that they had already covered in the previous class period. In fact, he stated that this was one of the things he disliked about the new school schedule because most of the teachers had review information at the beginning of class because there was at least one day since the last class period. He admitted that he was aware of the issue and tried to focus as much as possible.

Emotional engagement was also apparent and abundant for Nicholas. During my observations he would “strut” not only when he made a good grade, but also when he answered a questioned asked by Ms. Brown or a classmate correctly. Although he stated that he did not truly enjoy studying history, he seemed to find a lot of joy in the class during most observations. However, during one class period he seemed to have very low-energy and I asked him about this during the follow-up interview. He explained that he was simply tired on that day.

When asked what would have increased his engagement in his class, Nicholas, like most of the study participants expressed the importance of group work in helping him learn. He explained:
“I think I learn better when I work in group with others. I like it when we get to use a GoogleDoc to put all of our ideas together while we work on a project and then we can present our information to the class. I like it when my friends can tell me if I am right before we ask the teacher. The only problems is when someone doesn’t do their part and we all have to get the same grade . . . or when we don’t get to choose our own group. I like to choose who I work with.”

Additionally, Nicholas explained that he gets bored easily, so he wished that teachers would change assignments from time to time. He explained that he enjoyed Ms. Brown’s class, but that she did a lot of lecture and that the only reason he liked it was because she was funny and could keep it interesting.

Ms. Brown explained during one of the interviews that she and Nicholas had difficulty at the beginning of the school term as he was extremely talkative and distracted other students. Their relationship has improved and she now identifies him as a positive role model for others in the class. She often has him work with students who are having trouble when she assigns group work because he is good at explaining information to his cohorts. Ms. Brown also pointed out that Nicholas could be particularly passionate with regards to some topics lending

**Alexander**

Alexander is a 17-year old Hispanic male who is proud to be a good student. During my first encounter with Alexander, as well as during every other observation, I noted that he always wears headphones. When asked about this during an interview, he explained that he loved music and always listened to his iPod between classes. I noted that as soon as Ms. Caldwell began to teach or when he entered the room to be interviewed, he would remove his headphones and begin his work. Alexander proved to
be the most difficult study participant by which to gather data during the observation, as well as during the interview. He was completely stoic in his affect in class, as well as during the interviews.

Although I believe that Alexander exhibited cognitive and behavioral engagement in class, it was almost impossible to observe. He was quiet, did not respond or ask questions unless specifically called upon by Ms. Caldwell. The singular opportunity I had to observe the vocalization of his thoughts occurred during a classroom activity involving the ratification of the United States Constitution. Ms. Caldwell divided students into two groups, the Federalist and Anti-Federalist to debate the issues faced by creating a federal government. During the group work Alexander took the lead in developing the arguments that his group prepared for the debate. During the follow-up interview, I asked what about the assignment made him take control. He responded as follows:

“I really like debates and I like to win debates in class. It’s like one of the only time I like talking in class. The other day I wanted to make sure that our arguments were stronger than the other groups’ argument. I like that we have done some in class this year. Last year I don’t remember doing any, so I did not talk at all in history I think.”

As a follow-up to that response, I asked if there was any other type of activity that would increase his cognitive or behavioral engagement. He explained:

“I am engaged or I would not be able to make good grades, I think. I don’t want Ms. Caldwell to think that I don’t like her class. I really like history. I just don’t like to talk that much in any class. Sometimes I talk to my friends about some of the things we talk about in Ms. Caldwell’s class, especially when we talked about the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. I think that is because I know so many people who are in the military and it is the most interesting thing we have learned about in the class.”
When asked about his emotional engagement, specifically his lack of observable excitement or joy in the class he explained that he really enjoyed the class, but does not get very excited about anything in school. He did explain that he can show a lot of emotion when working on an activity like the debate in great part because he thinks of it as a competition and he would want his team to win.

When asked what changes he would make to his history course to increase his engagement, Alexander explained that although he did not enjoy speaking in class, he liked projects and listening to other students during discussions.

**Jasmine**

Jasmine is a 16-year old Black female who explained during her initial interview that although she was a good student, social studies was her worst subject until this school year. She felt it was important to explain that the reason this year was so much better was because her teacher, Ms. Caldwell made the content interesting. Unlike the other student participants, Jasmine is unsure of her future plans and has only thought as far as getting out of high school as quickly as possible. She understands that she need to have good grades so she can have an opportunity to do whatever she chooses after high school.

Jasmine asked and answered a number of questions during my observations. Most of the questions were extension of the content and I would consider higher-order in nature. This is an illustration of her cognitive engagement. For example, during discussion of the colonial period, Ms. Caldwell showed a chart of the major political, economic, social and religious differences between the three colonial regions.
Jasmine: I understand how the colonies can develop differently because of the economy because where they live, you know the climate and all is so different and I also understand how people think differently about religion, but if they came from the same country, why would they be different politically?

Ms. Caldwell: Jasmine, first of all, were all of the colonist from the same place.

Jasmine: Uhhh. I think. Classmates murmur. Several say some people came from other European nations, like France.

Ms. Caldwell: Jasmine do all the states in the United States govern the same way? Do they elect their official the same way?

Jasmine: I don’t know.

Ms. Caldwell: They don’t. Can you think about why this may be the case? Why might South Carolina politics look different from California?

Jasmine: Maybe because South Carolina is older as a state than California.

Ms. Caldwell: Good thought, what else—anyone else?

During the follow-up interview, I asked Jasmine about this interchange and she explained that sometimes she does not think as quickly about some of the information as other students. She stated that she likes to work with her teacher one-on-one, if possible because of this. She also shared that she does not usually like to communicate information in front of the class unless she is sure that her answer is correct or that what she had to say was not “stupid.”

During each post-observation interview, Jasmine’s comments were most often related to her behavioral engagement. When asked for evidence that she was engaged during the class period, she always pointed out that she was awake, sitting up and paying attention to Ms. Caldwell. She explained that in previous social studies classes she would often fall asleep or work on assignments for other classes. When I probed as to the difference this school terms she pointed to two factors. The first factor was Ms.
Caldwell, who believed was a good teacher who cared that her students learned. The second factor was her fear of failing the EOC exam. She explained that many of her friends who were seniors this year who liked history had not done well on the exam and it negatively affected their grade point average. She was concerned about that especially since she did not particularly enjoy history.

When asked what would increase her engagement in her history class, Jasmine answered lots of projects and group work. When asked why these were important to her, she explained that she craved interactivity and group work and projects gave her an opportunity to collaborate with others and show her creative side. When asked what types of group projects she liked, she explained that the type did not matter as long as she had the opportunity to work with the students she wanted to work with for the activity. She did not like working with students who did not share the work equally.

Jasmine also iterated several times during interviews that she wished all of her teachers could work with her one-on-one. She even mentioned that she knew she was lucky that she was in the high school she attended because her friends at other school in the district were in large classes and that their teachers did not have as much time as Ms. Caldwell did to answer questions.

**Barbara**

Barbara is a 16-year old White female who enjoys school and describes herself as always eager to learn. This was evident in her interactions in class as she was, during my observations, the first student to raise her hand each time the teacher asked a question. During our initial interview, she explained that she answers questions, but does not
usually ask questions during class. She also explained that she worked very hard the first part of every school year because the spring semester is always more difficult as she is a softball player and that takes a lot of time. She acknowledged that she was not as engaged in her academic work when her time was split between softball and work; however, she did all she could to keep her grades high.

Barbara’s cognitive engagement in United States History is evident by her participation in classroom activities, namely her willingness to answer questions and participate in classroom discussions on an ongoing basis. During my time in the class I witnessed several thoughtful and relevant classroom comments that contributed to the overall discourse, as well as illustrated her understanding of the content that was presented. Of the study participants, Barbara seemed to be the most outwardly invested in her learning and she often expressed this in the post-observation interviews. On one such occasion she stated:

“I think that what we learned today about the US Constitution will help me understand what it means to be an American citizen. I mean, I am going to vote soon, I hope and I am glad that I am learning about this stuff.”

Like her cognitive engagement, Barbara’s behavioral engagement was evident throughout my observations. As stated earlier, she was the first students to raise her hand when Ms. Caldwell asked a question, but she also often volunteered to point out things on the interactive white board or on maps that were displayed around the room. During one of the interviews, Barbara explained that getting up and doing things during class kept her engaged in her learning. She stated that she likes to be class leader and in charge whenever possible.
Emotional engagement was also in evidence. During observations, Barbara seemed outwardly happy to be in class and this was a sentiment shared by Ms. Caldwell. During one of the teacher interviews Ms. Caldwell explained that Barbara was one of her only students that never complained about the nature of an assignment and in fact tried to make the assignment more interesting by making it a whole class or group activity or some sort of game. Although I did not observe this behavior during my observations, it seemed in line with Barbara’s personality.

When asked what would increase her engagement, Barbara had the most varied answers. She stated that watching videos, teacher lecture and group work were important to her learning process. Additionally, Barbara also shared that the personal relationship with her teachers was very important to her learning. She explained:

“Teachers who engage me the most act like coaches. They have a lot of enthusiasm and I like it when they, like, like what they are teaching. Some teachers seem not to like their subject or students either. That’s why I like Ms. Caldwell. She gets really excited when she teachers and she motivates us to learn, but not in a mean way. . . I like a lot of activities and to be pushed to learn and that keeps me engaged—not doing the same thing every day.”

Barbara also stated that she wished that all of the assignments had some group work included just so she could interact with her classmates. She did not think it would help her learn better, but stated that it is just nice to be able to talk to her classmates about what they are learning.

Ms. Brown

As the veteran teacher in this study, Ms. Brown exhibited a great deal of confidence in her ability to instruct students and especially to hold their attention and focus during instruction. Although she used a variety of instructional methods as she
taught, she would still be described as relatively traditional in many ways. As pointed out in Chapter 3, Ms. Brown’s classroom was organized in orderly rows and students were expected to follow traditional methods of getting her attention, such as raising their hands and asking permission to leave the classroom for any reason.

As stated in the student interviews, Ms. Brown was considered by her students to be a supportive and caring teacher who worked to develop positive relationships with her students. She often used self-deprecating language to get students to laugh; however, during observations, students seemed to be respectful and eager to follow her leadership. This factor contributed to the emotional engagement evidenced in the classroom.

Ms. Caldwell

Ms. Caldwell did not have the years of experience that Ms. Brown had; however, she also displayed confidence in her ability to instruct students. Her classroom was also orderly; however, there was a sense of relaxed attentiveness that was not evident in Ms. Brown’s classroom. Her room was organized to support student groups in during two of the observations. Students were allowed more freedom to move about and she did not require students to gain her attention to leave the classroom to blow their nose or use the restroom (procedures were in place for student access a hall pass).

Ms. Caldwell’s students seemed to identify with her on a personal level and it can be assumed that her youth was a factor in her ability to engage the students behaviorally and emotionally. During observations, students would often ask non-content related questions centered on pop culture and Ms. Caldwell was able to engage the students appropriately during the discussion without losing control of the classroom.
Patterns and Themes across Observations and Interviews

Data from this study showed a number of interesting results. The findings show that students engage in their instructional environment similarly in their cognitive and behavioral engagement, but differently with regards to their emotional engagement. Most of the students studied demonstrated their cognitive and behavioral engagement as they participated actively through questioning and discussion and were willing to share their knowledge, as well as misunderstandings with their classmates. In contrast, the range of emotional responses was varied. Some of the participants were outwardly excited about the learning process and expressed it without hesitation. Other study participants were quiet and preferred not to show that they were emotionally engaged in the content.

A second pattern or theme identified through the observations and interviews is the desire for interpersonal activities to engage student during their learning. Students reported being more engaged during group work or working one-on-one with their instructor over whole group activities, such as taking notes or watching video; however, students also reported that certain types of videos, namely feature films were much more engaging than other types of videos. Most of the students reported that they were more engaged in their learning when working with others and that it increased their ability to learn the content. Furthermore, students saw a connection between group work and assignments that were product focused.

Another theme identified by both teachers and student was the importance of building relationships. All of the students contributed their success in their United States History course in part to the teachers. Each student reported having a personal
relationship with the teacher, yet at varying degrees. This finding validates longitudinal data reporting “that students who experience teacher-student interactions characterized by high levels of warmth and support or low levels of conflict gain more in achievement” (Hughes et al., 2008).

Based on my observations and interviews a number of patterns and themes evident in the classroom observations and student interviews that encouraged cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement. I identified those opportunities as falling into four broad categories. Those categories are:

1. Opportunities to Produce
2. Opportunities to Engage with Others
3. Opportunities to Be Vocal
4. Positive Reinforcement by Instructors

**Opportunities to Produce**

All of the students also identified using projects as a method for increasing their engagement. In fact, during one of the interviews, Barbara explained:

“I love when we do projects in all of my classes. It gives us a chance to show the teacher what we know in a fun and exciting way and we can be creative. Since everyone in this class is so-like supportive, we know that no one will make fun of us.”

Ophelia made a similar point, but also expressed that:

“It is easier to make a good grade on most projects because the teacher is not just grading for the right answer, but also how neat we are and how we put it together. I really like when we can get up in front of the class and talk or act out something. I also like portfolios or things that we do that let us do a gallery walk at the end of the class period.”
There were multiple opportunities observed in both classes for students to create products, including traditional written products, political cartoons, and debates. The student engagement for the class as a whole tended to increase during periods when students were in the midst of these experiences.

**Opportunities to Engage With Others**

All of the students in the study, except one cited group work as one of the ways they felt engaged in the school setting. Both teacher participants identified the use of group work as one of the instructional practices that they used to increase student interest in the content, as well as to allow students to assist one another during their learning experience. A number of research studies have shown the benefits of group work to student learning. In fact, the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement showed that positive group experiences contribute to student learning, retention and academic success. Additionally the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively with others has become a focus of the 21st Century skills that educators are expected to impart to students.

**Opportunities to Be Vocal**

Both teachers utilized multiple methods to allow student voice in their classrooms, most typically through the use of class discussions. During the interviews, several students referenced other opportunities that increased their engagement, including the use of topic debates and class presentations. Barbara and Nicholas shared an experience they had with a debate on the adoption of the Declaration of Independence
and the start of the American Revolution unit in Ms. Caldwell’s class. They explained that Ms. Caldwell divided the class into two groups: one group supported rebellion and the other had to support the colonist remaining loyal to the British. Both students expressed that this was one of the best learning experiences they had because all of the students in the group had to participate and defend their point of view. Although Nicholas is a very quiet student and his side of the debate lost, he explained that he enjoyed defending his side of the issue.

**Positive Reinforcement by the Instructor**

There was ample evidence of positive reinforcement by each instructor that encouraged student engagement, particularly emotional engagement during each of the observations, as well as through the student interviews. These positive reinforcement factors include multiple experience including the use of humor, positive body language and verbal feedback. In additional, several of the students explained that when their teacher gave them positive feedback in front of the class, it increased their engagement and commitment to doing a good job in the class.

**Outliers**

Patterns of cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement were evident. However, there were a number of areas of variance between teacher and students responses to engagement factors.
One example was the influence of external factors the affect student learning. Ms. Caldwell mentioned several times during the interviews that she felt that a lot of issues outside of class effected how students responded to instruction. She stated:

“Sometimes I expect the issue to arise and I can make adjustment in advance. It is like on a day we have a pep rally scheduled and I won’t give a quiz or test. On that day, I might have students do a group activity or some other type of project. However, some days external factors, such as the weather wreaks havoc on what I have planned and I have to monitor and adjust my lesson.”

Issues external to the school setting were also identified through the student interviews. Nicholas pointed out that if he did not have a good night at home because he was up studying or even watching television, it effected his engagement in class. He commented that it usually made him less engaged in the learning and even sometimes he would fall asleep.

One of the most significant differences between the two teachers was their response to behavioral indicators of disengagement. Ms. Brown often ignored quiet murmuring in her class as well as students passing notes or participating in otherwise distracting behaviors. On the other hand, Ms. Caldwell was very sensitive to private chatter and outward signs that students were not completely engaged in their learning. Both teachers addressed disruptions that effected students who were trying to focus on their learning.
Summary and Conclusion

The results of the study bear a relationship between student engagement and student achievement. From the perspective of the teachers, the behavioral/participatory engagement contributes most to the achievement. However, students believe that emotional engagement, most specifically their relationship with their teacher and other students play the biggest role in their academic success in the setting. The evidence of cognitive engagement is unclear based on the study as both the students and teachers identified this to a lesser degree in contributing to their success. Although this is the case, it is important to note that each student participant is considered academically strong.
CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This research adds to the existing body of literature that seeks to describe and understand student engagement. The chosen methodology focuses on student and teacher perception of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive factors of engagement within a single study (Fredricks et al., 2004). The selection of teachers who are considered effective in their instruction strategies, as well as students who are considered highly engaged and academically successful offer insight into factors that can offer strategies for effective instruction in classrooms. Furthermore, the use of the phenomenology offers insight into the personal experiences, expectations and perceptions held by both teachers and students for engagement in classrooms. This awareness gained from this study offers further implications for classroom research, social studies (history) teacher pre-service education, as well as for classroom teachers.

Summary of the Study

The stated goals of this study were to examine teacher and student views on the significance of cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement as related to academic success in United States History classrooms. The expectation was that the perceptions gathered through the research would offer insight into the structures and strategies that lead to classroom success for students. It was beyond the scope of this study to draw a correlation between student engagement and academic achievement, but it offered varied perspective for
the types of engagement that are important to student learning and the role teacher instruction plays in that engagement.

Ultimately, both the teacher and student participant in the study recognized that engagement was necessary for academic achievement as the students were more likely to actively participate in the learning process. This was evident in both the interviews and the observations conducted during the study.

**Addressing the Research Questions**

The stated goals of this study was to examine teacher and student views on the significance of cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement as related to academic success in United States History classrooms. The research questions, which were based on the HSSSE were designed to gather teacher and student understanding of and perceptions related to cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement.

The initial questions asked of the teachers focused on their ability to define and describe engagement, their understanding of instructional practices that they used to promote engagement, as well as identify student engagement when they see it in their classrooms.

Both instructors presented in this study defined engagement similarly during the initial interview and expressed their understanding of the significance of cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement in a student’s academic success. Each instructor identified cognitive engagement as the most difficult engagement type to influence and observe. As a consequence, they were not as vocal during the post-observation interviews in identifying cognitive engagement as they were in the other categories.

Both instructors also addressed the type of academic work that was most significant to student engagement, citing that the more actively involved students were in the process,
the more likely learning was to take place. However, Ms. Brown, the more veteran teacher remarked on several occasions that the study of history at times requires that students sit through a lecture in order to gain and overarching understanding of the information that would later be used for more active engagement. Additionally, both instructors commented on instructional practices and relationship development as significant factors in student success.

With regard to specific examples of student engagement referenced by the teachers, both Ms. Brown and Ms. Caldwell cited that the students who participated in the study were likely to participate actively in classroom discussions, as well as complete assignments as directed. Both instructors pointed to examples for class observations where all students (including those who were not participants in the study) were focused and participatory in the lesson; however, they also acknowledge that there were instances when activities they designed were not as well received by students as they felt they would be during their planning.

As with the teachers, the initial questions asked of students centered on their understanding of the concepts related to cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement. The students were understandably not as clear in their definition and their responses were more in line with their personal feelings about the teacher and the content, as well as how much joy they felt in the classroom. Most of the students focused initially on their ability to interact not only with their instructor, but also with other students in their class. Most of the students felt initially that academic success was tied to how easy it was to be actively involved in their learning, particularly through group work and other forms of collaboration.

During post-observation student interviews, most of the students were able to point to specific points in the lesson in which they were not engaged in their learning; however, the majority of the students felt that this did not occur often, even during the observation period.
It is important to note that all of the students believed that they had a positive relationship with their instructor, which also aided in their engagement. With regard to behavioral engagement, most students identified their ability to pay attention as evidence of their engagement in their learning. Several students stated that although made good grades in other classes, they often allow themselves to be distracted in those settings.

As a consequence of this study, it is evident that both the teachers and students believe that cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement to be significant factors in academic achievement, with specific instructional practices serving to bolster their views.

Implications for Practice

Implications for Pedagogical Changes in Social Studies Classrooms

This study highlighted the need for including considering student engagement as a factor in student achievement. The patterns identified through the study, including opportunities for collaboration and produce work that is authentic and of interest to the student.

Much of the information presented in educational circles advocates for pedagogies that are authentic and relevant to students. Overwhelmingly students in this study identified a preference active learning. That stated, teachers must be prepared to implement instructional strategies that encourage student engagement. This may be of particular consequence in the development of social studies instructors, primarily in the area of history were didactic methodologies are often considered the most effective way for student to gain necessary knowledge.

Additionally this study also reinforces research that suggests that a teacher’s relationship with students may be a defining factor in student engagement. Students who
perceive a positive working relationship with their instructor are more likely to volunteer their energy to the expectations set by the teacher. This includes the ability of the teacher to help students self-regulate and thus manage their own engagement. It was observed that both Ms. Brown and Ms. Caldwell took opportunities to encourage all students to participate in the instructional activities presented during class and when necessary address students individually. Taking a cue from both of these teachers, it is important that educators develop the relationships with students so those instructions can motivate students as necessary to engage in the learning process.

**Limitations**

In addition to the limitations presented in Chapter 1 as determined prior to the start of this study, there were additional limitations that were realized as the study was conducted. First, the data was limited to a very small number of students and teachers. Although this was the nature of the design of the study, it does not change the fact that the perspectives given by both teachers and students.

Second, the study only involved students who were high performers in the selected class; therefore, it did not take into account the perceptions of students who would be defined as underperforming. Additionally, since the students identified in the study self-identified as high-performing in all classes, it is difficult to delineate the effect that the particular content area had on student engagement.

A third limitation in the study was the limited number of observations and interviews over the period of time set forth in the study. Since the research was done over two months with visits that were not on consecutive days it is possible that the research does not illustrate issues might occur when students experience fatigue from an
extended length of time in a particular area of content. Additional observations might have revealed student behaviors that further verified or undermined the findings of the study. Student engagement is complicated and this study presents information that warrants further study.

Upon further reflection on one of the major areas of limitation presented in Chapter 1, namely my previous relationship with the two teacher participants in this study, I did not feel that it played a significant factor in the outcome of this study. I did find myself considering during observations whether or not my overall positive conclusions were a result of the fact that I believe both teachers to be skilled instructors committed to the success of their students. However, I believe that the evidence gathered through my observations, as well as the information presented by student participants actually confirms this supposition. Accordingly, as described in Chapters 1 and 3 the selection of instructors and students who were considered successful was designed to present a conclusion that would offer evidence strategies to increase student engagement using information from individuals that experienced this phenomenon.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused on the perceptions of teachers and students related to the students’ cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement. While the study had a limited scope in that it involved two classrooms, two teachers and six students, it has attempted to enrich the literature by providing an alternative investigation of student engagement based on the personal experiences of the participants. This is in contrast to the more common use of the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE)
which is designed to look at student engagement in a quantitative manner. Hopefully, this study will initiate other research questions that could assist in the assessment of student engagement.

There are several areas of potential research that this study brings to light. One such idea relates to the use of mixed methods to analyze student engagement. A study using the HSSSE coupled with a similar qualitative method as defined in this study would offer additional information for analysis. Such a study could involve students completing the HSSSE with selected students also participating in a focus group or a case study based on their responses to the survey. The use of the quantitative study would offer a baseline for student identifying students that meet particular standards as outlined in the study. The addition of the qualitative measures could expose findings that may be more meaningful and possibly validate or disqualify the results presented in the HSSSE.

Another area for potential research might focus on the engagement in students who are low-performing or identify themselves as lacking engagement. This study focused on students who were identified by their teachers and self-identified as engaged and high performing. The purpose of this criterion was to ascertain whether the teachers and students perceived a relationship between these two factors. This research could also be done with students who identify themselves in a manner contrary to the students in the study.

A third area of additional research could focus on other content areas in the social studies, as well as other fields. Although there is anecdotal information that suggests that students are more in engaged in some content than others, there is very little empirical evidence to support this assertion. Diamond (2007) suggest that students involved in
vocational programs, namely those that required students to transfer from a traditional setting to a purely vocational setting reported higher levels of engagement after the transition. Many of these students were initially considered “at-risk” for graduation, but many were successfully after their move.

Another area for research might focus on instructional practices as the primary factor and student engagement as the outcome. This could allow the researcher to attend to what instructional practices lead to student engagement as compared to those that do not. Research in this area is limited; however, Ahlfeldt, et. al (2005) suggests that particularly in higher education, students who are instructed using Project Based Learning (PBL) methodologies experienced higher levels of engagement.

Finally, since this research only focused on a single cohort, further research might involve a longitudinal study focused on a variety of students taking United States History (or another identified course), a selection of teachers over several years or a selection of students over several years. A longitudinal design might add additional insight into other factors that might influence student engagement and academic success.

Although I identified four patterns for opportunities, it is also important to consider that if there were more participants in the study, the potential for additional patterns or trends would be likely.

**Conclusion**

In order to address many of the issues faced in secondary education today, educational leaders must consider the effect student engagement has on academic achievement and student success. It should be an expectation that educator factor student cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement in instructional practice.
Additionally, it is important that students are also aware of the factors that affect their engagement so that they can implement self-regulation to improve their own success. Such understanding and the subsequent experiences that lead to student learning are central to the purpose of education, regardless the content that is taught or grade level of the student. Because the experiences shared by students and the best practices identified in this study show a relationship between student engagement and perception of achievement, the results of this study add to the literature regarding the responsibility of educators to acknowledge student engagement.
REFERENCES


Diamond, M. (2007). Vocational students’ engagement and career objectives:


Mehra, B. (2002). Bias in Qualitative Research: Voices from an Online Classroom. 

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Initial Teacher Interview Questions

1. How do you engage the students in your classroom?
2. Can you define cognitive, behavioral/social and emotional engagement?
3. Describe your interactions with students. How do they differ in their quality, time, and focus?
4. Describe the opportunities that you offer your students for collaboration.
5. Describe the feedback that you give your students on a regular basis?
6. Describe the behavior and affective qualities of students who you would describe as engaged in your classroom.
7. Describe the types of academic work that you think are most effective for student learning.

Initial Student Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Can you define engagement as it relates to your work in United States History?
3. Describe the kinds of academic work you are engaged in your United States History course.
4. How often do you ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion?
5. Describe opportunities for collaboration that you experience in class.
6. Describe your behavior and emotions when you are engaged in your learning.
7. Describe the academic work that you believe is most effective for your learning.

Post-Observation Teacher Questions

1. Were your students cognitively, behaviorally and emotionally engaged in your observed lesson?
2. What evidence do you have that your students were engaged in the lesson?

Post-Observation Student Questions

1. Were you engaged in your work during the class period?
2. What evidence supports your engagement?
3. With reference to this specific event in class, explain how you were engaged with your learning?
APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Initial Interview Teacher #1
- Preliminary Student Interview
- Preliminary Student Interview
- Preliminary Student Interview

Initial Interview Teacher #2
- Preliminary Student Interview
- Preliminary Student Interview
- Preliminary Student Interview

Post-Observation Interview Teacher #1
- Classroom Observation

Post-Observation Interview Teacher #2
- Classroom Observation

Repeat Process Twice
- Post-Observation Student Interview
- Post-Observation Student Interview
- Post-Observation Student Interview
- Post-Observation Student Interview
- Post-Observation Student Interview
- Post-Observation Student Interview
APPENDIX C: DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

Conduct Initial Teacher and Student Interviews → Code Data Using Coding System → Analyze Data to Determine Commonalities and Outliers → Conduct Classroom Observations → Identify Patterns and Establish Conclusions and Areas for Further Research

Repeat Process Twice
APPENDIX D: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION CODING FORMAT

C: Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement  
B: Behavioral/Participatory/Social Engagement  
E: Emotional Engagement

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