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Challenges of Attempting a Pedagogical Shift from an Essentialist Classroom to the Reformed Model

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CHALLENGES OF ATTEMPTING A PEDAGOGICAL SHIFT FROM AN ESSENTIALIST CLASSROOM TO THE REFORMED MODEL

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the challenges a teacher faces when shifting from an essentialist classroom toward a reformed approach in a high school US History class. The action research is taking place at a high school predominantly comprised of minority students who are considered to be of a high level of poverty.

The theoretical framework centers around the belief that a constructivist classroom will increase student engagement while enabling the students enhance their critical inquiry skills. This study's mixed methods design uses both quantitative and qualitative data in a narrative case study describing the challenges for a teacher tasked with teaching a content heavy course. Data collection included student engagement surveys, as well as classroom evaluations following the Reformed Teaching Observation Protocol (RTOP), describe the challenges of implementing constructionist teaching practices to increase student achievement and engagement. Findings include a positive correlation. The more the classroom teacher followed the guidelines set forth in the RTOP, the more engagement amongst students increased. The challenges presented included students' lack of ability to communicate academically and obstacles to thinking critically.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Topic and Background

The essentialist construct in educational philosophy was made official by the federal government in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), and is generally regarded as launching the current standards-based curriculum and instruction that dominates American public schooling (Lefkowits & Miller, 2006). Testing as a means to improve instruction, and thus public education, has been promoted at the federal level and has led to "more frequent testing, including a resurgence of standardized testing at the high school level" (Vogler & Virtue, 2007, p. 54). This belief stems from the notion that a back-to-basics essentialist curriculum with state-mandated standardized curriculum and tests will strengthen education in the United States.

South Carolina's social studies teachers are held to accountability standards to ensure rigor, which is a hallmark of essentialist philosophy (Ebert & Culyer, 2014). In the current climate of South Carolina's high schools, social studies teachers are faced with pressure to perform and demonstrate improvement on high stakes assessments. These high stakes assessments have largely had a detrimental effect on curriculum and instruction. Vogler and Virtue (2007) argue that even though "holding teachers responsible for the education of their students seems to be a legitimate practice" the

ultimate consequence of high stakes testing has the potential to create students who can do little more than regurgitate facts (p. 57).

The recent push towards more standardized testing comes from the neoconservative ascendancy in politics and society during the early 1980s, which ushered in the back to basics movement (Evans, 2004). This led state departments of education to develop objectives and benchmarks as a way to standardize the curriculum at each grade level. The subsequent testing is intended to ensure learning and accountability (Vogler & Virtue, 2007). However, there are unintended consequences of the culture of high stakes accountability. In classes where mandated state assessments are the norm, the instructional construct is based on teacher-centered essentialist philosophy, and student engagement is minimized.

Wineburg (2005) describes the overwhelming amount of content required of students to learn in order to prove that they understand US History, even though the content they are learning would better prepare the student for Jeopardy style trivia rather than teaching students critical thinking or becoming better citizens. The vast amount of content required in social studies standards has forced teachers to revert to a more direct, teacher-centered approach. Certain course specific assessments, such as end-of-course (EOC) exams, place "the burden of preparing students for exit exams on specific teachers and courses" and the teachers react to this burden by changing the way they teach (Chudowsky, Kober, Gayler, & Hamilton, 2002, p. 45). They abandon best practices for a more teacher-centric design. In *Impact of a High School Graduation Examination on Social Studies Teachers' Instructional Practices*, Vogler (2005) writes of the story of a teacher who is odds with how he teaches US History– which includes a state mandated

EOC – and the way he teaches his other classes. In US History he delivers the material directly, avoiding any type of enrichment activity explaining "all meaningfulness and relevancy to history is being lost on my students. As a result, they have a better factual base but a worse conceptual understanding of the subject and what it is good for" (p. 19).

The essentialist construct of mandated assessments has stressed testing as a means to ensure what is being taught and what is being learned. Teachers at the head of classes where state mandated testing occurs often use teacher-centered methods to push the curriculum onto the students. Vogler and Virtue (2007) state that "high-stakes testing has served as a catalyst for a movement away from constructivist, student-centered approaches such as discussion, role play, research papers, and cooperative learning" (p. 56). Teacher-centered instruction often comprises lower level questions and does not generally move beyond memorizing and listing facts, which is seemingly perfect for high-stakes assessments, yet not ideal for developing a love of history as it tends to "reduce history to merely a list of people, places, and dates" (Vogler, 2005, pp. 24-25). Furthermore, a teacher-centered classroom is configured in a way so the teacher can transmit information to a passive student. It is often text-book driven, and dominated by lectures (Roberson, 2014, p. 344). Lecture-based and text-book driven classes limit engagement among the students.

Research by Chudowsky, et al. (2002), shows that teachers "may focus their teaching on test preparation or a narrow subset of knowledge and skills, neglecting other important but more complex topics and skills that don't get tested" (p. 25). Ultimately, teachers sacrifice engagement and student-centered activities in order to teach all the standards, which leaves no time to re-teach material not understood, or to delve deeper

with enrichment activities in areas that students found interesting (Mueller & Colley, 2015).

Therefore, as teachers are driven by high stakes testing, their classrooms tend to mirror the essentialist construct. This approach disregards the student's ability to become a critical thinker and limits his or her ability to analyze historical documents as this requires high-order thinking skills. This action research study will attempt to identify the challenges of implementing a constructivist classroom in order to improve student engagement.

Problem of Practice

The below grade-level reading comprehension and lack of engagement of the US History students at West Hills High School (WHHS), a pseudonym, has led to low standardized test scores. On standardized tests, the students are able to answer lower level questions that simply require recitation of facts; however, they struggle when higher level questions require them to reason or make judgements by dissecting historical documents. By creating a student centered, constructionist classroom, where students learn to effectively analyze historical documents, the teacher-researcher will attempt to increase critical understandings of the content which will be shown through a deeper understanding of content vocabulary, increased critical analysis of historical documents, and better performance on higher level questions.

Study Rationale

Social justice in education is based on the belief that every person has the right to be educated and to play a part in that education. Increasing general literacy is a key component in giving students access to equal opportunity to education. Thus, allowing

the classroom to be modeled through a constructivist philosophy and creating a learner-centered ideology, students will take ownership of their education. As stated by Bond and Chernoff (2015), "honoring and valuing student voice through input, feedback, and authenticity is a pedagogical practice that embodies social justice and decentralizes teacher-centric authority. It is democratic." (p. 28). This furthers the foundation of Dewey's progressivist approach and is a basic premise in promoting the belief that students need to take ownership of their own education (Hartman, Neame, & Gedro, 2014). By allowing the students to construct knowledge in small group settings, knowledge will be more genuine.

Social studies has historically been the subject in which cultural responsiveness has been presented. However, since the introduction of standards driven high stakes testing, teaching issues surrounding social justice ideals has been replaced by the need to teach the required content (Johnson, Oppenheim, & Suh, 2009). The results of the state mandated assessments have produced clear evidence of an achievement gap in terms of test scores. For example, in order to teach students of color or those with a lower socio-economic status, the teacher must be conscious of the student's self-identity and be inclusive of culturally relevant material. Furthermore, Brown and Brown (2011) argue that in order to effectively teach students of color who might ask "what does history have to do with me?," the teacher must allow the student to self-reflect and make connections between their own lives and historical events. One way to do this is by engaging these students in critical thinking exercises through examination of historical documents.

In a study conducted by Andrews, McGlynn, and Mycock (2009), evidence is presented that links self-identity with students' attitudes toward history, explaining

"policy-makers and educationalists [must] take account of young people's ideas about their own identity and how these relate to national history" (p. 375). There is a relationship between one's own self-identity and his or her understanding of history. In order to minimize the achievement gap between white students and students of color, embracing a multi-cultural viewpoint is crucial. Sleeter (2003) states "children who historically have tended to be least well served by schools are children of color and children from economically poor communities" (p. 24). The standards that are taught are often written by members of the dominant culture, leaving out the multi-cultural perspectives. Textbooks are often devoid of controversies surrounding multi-cultural perspectives. As Diane Ravitch (2010) writes in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, textbooks "avoid controversy" by sanitizing them thus creating an "Empire of Dullness" (p. 234). Thus, the essentialist philosophy can fill the student's heads with knowledge, but it is not designed to cultivate a true love of learning or to make history relevant.

Pahl (2003) defines the essentialist back-to-basics teaching of knowledge as "trivialization" of historical facts which has led the achievement gap to appear in mandated tests. One way to potentially overcome this gap between higher socio-economic status (SES) schools and lower SES schools is to teach toward a more collaborative process where the students can take part, rejecting the essentialist or a teacher-centered classroom and regurgitation, and more toward the goal of a culturally responsive constructivist classroom.

Students "come to class with competing narratives about the world" which need to be analyzed and unpacked (Noboa, 2012, p. 60). By adding multi-cultural perspectives

to history standards educators could help to close the achievement gap between white students and students of color, allowing all students to appreciate each group's contribution to the world, and possibly take ownership of their history education. One way to add a multi-cultural perspective is by introducing historical documents and artifacts from outside the textbook, as this would connect the students to the history and allow them to understand the historical and cultural relevance.

As a teacher, I feel constrained by the demands of the district and my school as I am forced to follow a certain ideology that may be at odds with my personal teaching philosophy. Teaching numerous state standards and requiring my students to take state mandated assessments contradicts the goals of social studies. The social sciences, as the name implies, must consist of a curriculum where active democratization and social change should be included. By creating a constructionist classroom and believing a learner-centered environment would benefit the students, the teacher will act as a facilitator while guiding the students to discover how to impact society while helping to broaden the ideal of social justice.

Research Question

Historical literacy and the ability to analyze historical artifacts (primary and secondary sources, maps, charts, pictures, political cartoons, etc.) are intertwined. The effects of literacy and critical analysis are necessary to promote civic engagement and awaken a social consciousness (Marshall & Klein, 2009). The lack of engagement in social studies classrooms has been linked to an absence of student-centered instruction according to a study by Chiodo and Byford (2004). Additionally, the pressure of high stakes standardized testing has led teachers to design lessons based on regurgitation of

facts and resulted in more teacher-centered classrooms (Faulkner, & Cook, 2006; Vogler, & Virtue, 2007). This teacher-centered instruction has steered classrooms away from more engaging activities and authentic assessments where the students are the focal point. US History teachers have seen how the high stakes testing movement has created classrooms where instruction has become mainly lecture oriented with little input from the students. It is clear that the lack of developing critical thinking skills is harming the students in terms of their gaining a deeper understanding. This action research study will attempt to discover if US History students will become more engaged and responsive to developing independent inquiry skills in a more constructivist classroom.

RQ: What would be the challenges in changing my teaching methods from an essentialist approach toward a more reformed teaching practice by focusing on developing inquiry and problem-solving skills following a constructivist philosophy – a pedagogical shift in teaching?

Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this action research study is to examine the challenges a teacher faces when shifting from an essentialist classroom toward a reformed approach in a high school US History class. The classroom activities will allow for a student-centered approach that utilizes and encourages an analysis of primary and secondary historical documents and provides a deeper understanding of social studies content. The secondary purpose is to develop the students' critical thinking and inquiry skills.

Theoretical Framework

The school in which this action research study will be conducted, West Hills High School (pseudonym), is aligned with the essentialist discourse as evidenced by the way

classes are taught and is precipitated by the pressure of various state assessments. All US History classes culminate with an End of Course Exam (EOC).

The South Carolina US History content standards are comprised of eight units, which are further broken into more specific objectives (known as indicators). The culminating EOC asks the students approximately 55 multiple choice questions (the number can vary from year to year). These questions range in difficulty from those that test basic factual knowledge to questions requiring analysis of primary sources to higher level synthesis questions. It is evident that the students do well on the easier, lower level questions but struggle on those that include analysis or higher order thinking. My action based research question will attempt to document the challenges of implementing a reformed approach to teaching where students develop the skills to properly analyze primary sources and develop historical literacy. This will be occur by working toward a more student-centric constructivist classroom, through increasing the student's own reading comprehension of content keywords and analysis of historical documents.

Essentially, constructivism is based upon the idea that people learn by doing. More specifically, the theories of Jean Piaget "emphasizes the learner's contribution to meaning and learning through both individual and social activity" in that learners select and construct what they know (Bruning, Schraw, Norby, & Ronning, 2004, p. 194). Biggs (1996) further states that "learners arrive at meaning by actively selecting, and cumulatively constructing, their own knowledge, through both individual and social activity" (p. 348). The constructivist approach has metamorphized in many different directions and its meanings have been co-opted by other theorists, but the main thrust is still present: students learn by doing.

Constructivism directly lends itself to the active learning process. Active learning involves students constructing ideas where they themselves have the autonomy and independence to manage the learning (Anthony, 1996). This action research study will rely on student engagement and developing an atmosphere conducive for student-led learning.

Educational philosophies change but can be beset with challenges. According to Schiro (2013), teachers are not only able to "believe in more than one ideology at a time" but can "change their ideological orientation" (p. 248). Transformation often accompanies changes associated in the teacher's placement, subject taught, or stage in the teacher's career. The contextual approach holds that the teacher "switch[es] their ideology depending on the nature of the curriculum task they are engaged in or the ideology of the group or individual with whom they are speaking" (Schiro, 2013, p. 257).

Furthermore, approaches may change based on which unit is being taught. Sometimes, certain standards lend themselves better toward differing approaches, or the students enrolled have many needs and instruction must be differentiated. Ideological shifts mirror changes in context.

In a learner-centered classroom, the teacher attempts to guide the student within activities that will enable the learner to construct meaning from personal experiences. The teacher acts as the facilitator so the learner will develop individualized knowledge (Schiro, 2013).

The current demographic of West Hills HS includes a high percentage of minority students from rural areas. We are considered a high-poverty school. Despite my personal

beliefs in the value of learner-centered ideology, I have organized my classes within the essentialist context, because of implementation of high-stakes testing.

Action Research Methodology

Often, research methods vary based on who is doing the actual research and for which purpose that research is conducted. For teachers, all research can have benefits, whether it be traditional design, consisting of experimental or nonexperimental research, or action research revolving around reflection and inquiry of the teaching process. According to Mertler (2014) "educational research involves the application of the scientific method to educational topics, phenomena, or questions in search of answers" (p. 6). The standard idea behind action research is to look at a problem and attempt to find solutions, as any scientist would, using the steps of the scientific method, whereby a researcher would identify a problem, reason through a hypothesis, conduct an experiment, gather data, and conclude

Action research, according to Carr and Kemmis (2003) is "a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out" (p. 162). The teacher-researcher will undertake action research to recognize and improve teaching in an on-going basis. Reflection allows educators to hone their skills in a meaningful way; essentially, to continually run a series of "experiments" to improve teaching. Stringer (2013) designed a "Look, Think, Act" spiral that is "a continually recycling set of activities" where teachers "explore the details of their activities through a constant process of observation, reflection, and action" (p. 9). The action researcher is supposed to look at the problem

and possible solution(s) as a never ending cycle whereby the researcher (teacher) is always looking to improve. An action research study is conducted, then adjustments are made to streamline and emphasize effectual components. There is seemingly no end to the design.

Action research can be seen through the lens of teachers as the purveyors of the knowledge leading the investigation into problems involving classroom issues, in an attempt to increase effectiveness. Teacher directed inquiry is based on the idea that teachers themselves should be the ones directing experiments and attempting to find solutions to classroom problems. It is important to note that although action research, teacher-led inquiry, and reflection all share some common traits, there are some slight differences. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) explain that "action research … usually refers to research intended to bring about change of some kind, usually with a social justice focus, whereas teacher research quite often has the goal only of examining a teacher's classroom practice in order to improve it or better understand what works" (p. 8).

Teachers use self-reflection to analyze their process in order to find what is effective, or simply put: what works. The self-reflective teacher is always analyzing his or her methods in an attempt to improve, as it is a less formal conception than action research. Dewey (1938) stated that "to reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences" (p. 87.) Dewey's ideas incorporate the student's journey, and view education as a process rather than a goal. Teachers, through self-reflective inquiry, can

use action research methodology to continually improve their effectiveness by monitoring their results in an attempt to perfect the teaching process.

Dissertation Overview

In the subsequent chapters of this Dissertation in Practice (DiP), the teacher-researcher will discuss this action research study. Chapter Two, the "Review of Related Literature," will further explain the purpose of the review and discuss other research findings related to this action research study. Key concepts and findings by other researchers will be analyzed. In Chapter Three, "Action Research Methodology", the author will describe the research design in greater detail in order for any replication studies to be conducted. In Chapter Four, "Findings, Discoveries, Reflections, and Analyses," the author will describe the findings of the study and will interpret the results. Finally, in Chapter Five, "Summary of the Major Points/Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research," the author will discuss major points of the study and develop an action plan for future research. As this is an action research study, Chapter Five will present the implications and findings of the current study and plans for further study deemed necessary by the teacher-researcher's reflective practice.

Summary and Conclusion

Many US History classes in South Carolina have followed the essentialist high stakes testing apparatus in which teachers have narrowed the curriculum, neglected non-tested material, and focused on test scores. Included in this change has been the reduction in activities that can be both engaging and beneficial in building critical thinking skills. This study will help address the lack of student-led activities by engaging learners through specific vocabulary activities, peer led groups, and historical document analysis

in order to increase both fact-based knowledge and critical thinking. Through a constructionist framework, the teacher-researcher gives the students autonomy to become active learners.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Introduction

In this review of literature, the effects of the essentialist led high-stakes testing movement will be analyzed. Further, review of the development of a constructivist ideology within a system that values standardized testing, how it will occur, with exploration of how it can effectively stem the tide of teacher-led instruction and allow the student to take ownership of the content through a learner-centered approach.

This literature review will encompass two main concepts: the conceptual framework will detail the problems associated with the current state of essentialist teaching and the benefits of switching to the constructivist ideology. This section will describe the changes in educational philosophy that have led to teacher-led classrooms, as well as the birth of the accountability movement that has led to the imposition of objectives and standards. The literature shows that increased accountability has led to a myriad of problems, such as a narrowing of the curriculum (Au, 2007), a push for more fact-based content rather than critical thinking (Faulkner, & Cook, 2006; Vogler & Virtue, 2007), and a lack of engagement (Chiodo & Byford, 2004). Additionally, there is research that indicates that minority students are harmed by high stakes assessment movement (Pahl, 2003; Wei, 2012). Finally, a discussion of issues in social justice is

presented which will show that classrooms in which the students have more autonomy in their learning will result in more student engagement and understanding.

Next, the theoretical framework will be presented, demonstrated the benefits of moving towards constructivism. For example, with the implementation of an evaluative process to gage the degree of constructivist teaching, students begin to learn to think more critically when prior knowledge is activated first. This activation will compel the students to make connections and construct new knowledge (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987).

There are many aspects to this action research study. The goal is to not only increase test scores, but to increase student engagement and learning while helping students develop a mind for inquiry and critical thinking skills. This study will use primary source analysis, peer group formative assessments, a focus on key vocabulary and a constructivist approach to gaining knowledge.

Problem of Practice

The students at WHHS have demonstrated below grade-level reading comprehension and a generalized lack of engagement in the content area of US History. On standardized tests, the students are able to answer lower level questions that simply require recitation of facts. However, they struggle if the questions require them to perform higher level thinking or reasoning to make judgments through analysis of documents. Specifically, this has resulted in low standardized test scores on the US History EOC. Therefore, by creating a learner-centered, constructivist classroom where students learn to effectively analyze historical documents, the teacher-researcher will attempt to increase critical understanding of the content standards. This understanding

will be shown through a deeper functional comprehension of content vocabulary and an increase in critical analysis of historical documents, which will lead to better performance on higher level questions. (Patterson, Lucas, & Kithinji, 2012).

Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this action research study is to examine the challenges and solutions both teachers and students encounter when shifting from an essentialist classroom to one where the constructivist ideology is valued. This study will attempt to show increased gains in student engagement and learning as well as document challenges that arise. Furthermore, it is the hope of the teacher-researcher that by becoming a reformed teacher, the students will be better able to grasp basic content knowledge and activate this knowledge to increase their critical thinking skills when presented with historical artifacts.

Research Question

This action research study will analyze the challenges of implementing a constructivist approach in an essentialist classroom as the teacher attempts to determine whether U.S. History students can learn to think more critically by effectively processing higher level questions, as well as increase their content vocabulary in order to increase their content knowledge and critical inquiry.

> *RQ: What would be the challenges in changing my teaching methods from an essentialist approach toward a more reformed teaching practice by focusing on developing inquiry and problems solving skills following a constructivist philosophy – a pedagogical shift in teaching?*

Importance of the Literature Review

In organizing this literature review it is important to understand the background of the problem of practice and to explain previous studies that have attempted to address the problem. In an action research study, the teacher-researcher must use "evidence-based practice" to inform the researcher of previous research and allow the current study to follow new avenues (Van Ingen & Ariew, 2014, p. 88). Previous research is used by the teacher-researcher as background. This will allow the study being undertaken to not only reflect what has been done in the past but will introduce new problems and solutions that will add to the general knowledge of the topic.

Empirical studies use data to add credence to the practitioner. Using research where the data is complete gives the teacher-researcher scientific evidence that the problem has been studied while removing potential bias (Mertler, 2014). This literature review will contain both primary source and secondary sources of information. Primary sources are "firsthand accounts of original research", while secondary sources "do not consist of original research" but "rather they are summaries, compilations, analyses, or interpretations of primary information made by other individuals" (Mertler, 2014, p. 63). The pieces of literature will be read, categorized, synthesized and presented in the action research study in order to provide the reader with the requisite background of previously conducted studies.

Increased vocabulary acquisition and historical literacy in US History classes requires that students be able to decode words and understand the contextual meaning. Historical thinking compels students to learn analysis of documents. In order to accomplish this task, they must first grasp a proper knowledge of content. Students who

do not have adequate prior knowledge will not be able to activate their learning and this will hinder their acquiring of new material. This action research study will attempt to actively engage students through the use of a vocabulary modeling technique and then use the knowledge constructed to analyze historical documents.

Conceptual Framework

The resurgence of conservatism in the 1980's has had wide implications for public schools. As a reaction to the post-Vietnam malaise, the Department of Education under President Reagan sought news ways to ensure American exceptionalism. This neoconservative movement was a reaction to 1960's liberalism including the social reconstruction educational movement, ending its cyclical nature and causing its rapid demise during the 1980's (Schiro, 2013). The movement towards a back to basics mentality in history education was "driven by educational, political, and economic forces outside education" (Evans, 2004, pg. 171). The hallmark of this revival of the essentialist classroom was the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This led neoconservatives to implement No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – a hallmark of George W. Bush's presidency. NCLB led to accountability measure through the standards based approach (Parkison, 2009).

Importance of Standards and Objectives.

Objectives are "a key feature of any rational planning" including education (Popham, 2013, p. 85). Learning objectives have gotten more specified and explicit, often describing exactly what the students will learn and how they will express their knowledge. Accordingly, objectives have certain characteristics. For example, in order for the objective to have an evaluative importance it must be able to be measured post

instruction (Popham, 2013). Furthermore, the objective needs to contain "clearly explicated criteria of adequacy" so the student can be evaluated (p. 99). Eisner (2013a) discusses the importance of learning objectives and the how and why objectives were derived, noting that "the need for clarity and specificity" of objectives, is essential for development of curriculum (p. 109).

Unfortunately, the standards movement has created explicitly detailed objectives that may number in the hundreds (Hinde, 2005). This has led to a narrowing of the curriculum (Hinde, 2005, Vogler & Virtue, 2007). High stakes testing has forced the return of essentialist and teacher-centered classroom. (Au, 2007; Vogler, 2008). Often the teacher has been compelled to move away from meaningful classroom activities by leading instruction rather that allowing the students to participate through a learner-centered construct (Au, 2007). Thus, the pressure of high stakes testing has forced many teachers to design lessons based on regurgitation of facts which has resulted in more teacher-centered classrooms (Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). This has had a detrimental effect on the teaching of critical thinking and has harmed minority students (Pahl, 2003; Wei, 2012).

Problems with Standardized Assessments in the Essentialist Classroom.

The debate over high-stakes testing is seemingly reaching a tipping point as teachers, parents, and students have begun to revolt over the increasing use and importance of high stakes assessments (Strauss, 2015). When teachers and students are evaluated by high stakes testing, there is often a change in how instruction is presented (Vogler, 2008). If teachers, schools, and districts are graded upon the results of standardized tests then it stands to reason that working towards improving tests scores is

a major goal. Thus, as teachers we are caught in the middle of this maelstrom directing our efforts to teach to the test (Popham, 2001).

Gorlewski (2012) studied the impacts that high-stakes assessments have had on teaching. As a result of the states directing these assessments, the curriculum suffers and becomes narrowly focused on what will be tested (Au, 2007; Gorlewski, 2012). The teachers are guided, either directly or indirectly, toward focusing solely on standards, thus eliminating the possibility of any value added enrichment. Gorlewski (2012) did find, however, that by focusing a backward design the students were more apt to meet the necessary standards because of the emphasis on the standards.

This narrowed focus not only pressures the teacher to teach to the test, but it also forces the school to take resources and attention away from other subjects that are not part of the assessment program, such as general electives including the arts. Popham (2001) describes that schools often eliminate "fringe subjects that will cut into time that could be devoted to what's measured by the high stakes test" in what is called a "test-prep factory" (p. 20). This "erosion of a rich curriculum robs [the] children of important things they should be learning" (p. 20).

The end result is that prepping the students for the test is a score boosting game that places the teachers in a no-win situation (Popham, 2001). The pressure that is put upon the schools comes from outside sources and acts to label the schools as "failing" or not successful based upon the test scores. This can act to undermine effort to improve a school and possibly drive high performing students away while leaving good teachers with the belief that they must change their teaching methods.

However, when used effectively, the data collected from standardized assessments can be useful in guiding teachers in how they instruct. Using the results of high stakes tests to help determine future instruction and allow teachers to make curriculum decisions based on the outcomes can be seen as a positive development (Popham, 2001).

The recent push towards more standardized testing comes from the neoconservative ascent during the early 1980's which ushered in the back to basics movement (Evans, 2004). This led state departments of education to develop objectives and benchmarks as a way to standardize the curriculum at each grade level. The subsequent testing was to ensure learning. Vogler and Virtue (2007) state that policyholders have three reasons for the necessity of high stakes testing. First, accountability and performance of the teacher and school can be quantified. Second, standards bring consistency to the educational system that may have been absent before. Finally, "the results of the high-stakes test supplied educators with information that could help them make necessary instructional improvements", as well as allow the public to rate and compare school systems (pg. 55).

However, there are unintended consequences of the culture of high stakes accountability. One area of concern is the possible destruction of the student-teacher relationship. Vogler and Virtue (2007), write that students begin to represent a score – either passing or failing – and thus the teacher will "either enjoy the accolades or suffer the repercussions" (p. 56). Moreover, even with the negative attention that mandated testing brings, some states do not consider social studies important enough to test which has led to schools cutting it from the curriculum or relegating it to second-tier status,

forcing them into the dilemma of wanting testing as it will bring back its relevancy (Vogler & Virtue, 2007).

Delving further into the potential destructive nature of standards based high stakes testing, the research shows that it is having a detrimental effect on both teachers and students (Faulkner, & Cook, 2006; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). A positive teacher-student relationship is crucial for students to learn. However, it has been recognized that high stakes testing places a strain on that relationship, Shuman (2004) notes that teachers' feelings towards students can turn into bitterness if they feel the students will drag the class scores down (as cited in Yurichenko, 2007). This has led Vogler and Virtue (2007) to conclude "threats and sanctions that accompany mandated high-stakes testing have had a profound impact on how [teachers] perceive and interact with their students" which is often detrimental in the long run (p. 56).

Ultimately, Vogler and Virtue (2007) state that even though the reality of high stakes testing will be around for many years, teachers will have to learn to navigate it without losing their sense of purpose. Therefore, teachers must "resist" the testing culture and "instead trust their professional training and pedagogical knowledge to guide their instructional decisions" (Vogler & Virtue, 2007, p. 57).

At the middle and high school levels, where social studies are included in the state assessments, schools have also seen changes in curriculum. The state curriculum is used as a starting point for instructional planning (Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Unlike elementary schools which have reduced social studies content, middle and high schools have the opposite problem. The amount of content dictated by state standards can be daunting (Hinde, 2005).

High-stakes testing has had a consequential impact upon the classroom (Mueller & Colley, 2015; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006). Mueller and Colley (2015) further the research into the negative effects of high stakes testing by examining the impact of accountability and issues of curricular planning. Teachers felt that increased accountability would be a positive step to motivate the student to learn the content. They also felt that the standards-based approach gave structure to specific content. However, the teachers realized that even though the stakes were high, students did not feel the pressure of accountability and instead resulted in teachers "absorbing the responsibility of both their students and the school" (Mueller & Colley, 2015, p. 103).

Mueller and Colley (2015) also found that although teachers felt that the specific content standards made it easier to plan and map, it became a game as how to fit everything into their school year. The pace was increased and teachers struggled to figure out adequate pacing. Ultimately, the teachers were behind and had to rush the later standards leaving them with little time to re-teach material not understood or delve deeper with enrichment activities in areas that students found interesting; there was just not enough time (Mueller & Colley, 2015).

Additionally, Nichols, Glass, and Berliner (2006) also argued that pressure increased over time as more high stakes assessments were mandated. However, it was confirmed through research that accountability and pressure were positively correlated, yet advancement to the next grade was unrelated to the amount of pressure (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006). Nichols, Glass, and Berliner (2006) further point out that their study found "no dependable or compelling evidence that the pressure associated with

high-stakes testing leads to increased achievement" leaving the impression "there is no reason to continue the practice of high-stakes testing" (p. 52).

The belief that testing will improve instruction and thus public education has been promoted at the federal level. The idea that America's schools are doomed comes from *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) which implies that "more frequent testing, including a resurgence of standardized testing at the high school level, was needed" (Vogler & Virtue, 2007, p. 54). This belief stems from the notion that a back to basics essentialists construct will fix America's schools. Much of the research shows that high-stakes testing does not positively motivate students to discover the love of learning but rather engages the student out of fear – or not at all (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006; Stuckart & Glanz, 2010).

Moreover, teaching towards a test also brings up certain ethical complications, aside from the politicization of education. Vogler and Virtue (2007) illuminate the potential ethical dilemma in stating that teachers must learn "to navigate the testing waters without destroying their integrity or damaging their sense of purpose" (p. 57).

The pressure of high-stakes testing can put teachers, schools, and districts into ethical quandaries. Stephens and Gehlbach (2007) researched why students cheat. They came to the conclusion that students cheat for one of two reasons: they are either "under pressure" or "under-engaged" (p. 108). Therefore, if we refer back to the text – two main issues of standardized testing are the pressure it places on not only students, but also on teachers (Mueller & Colley, 2015; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006). In addition, high-stakes testing often forces the instruction to be led by teacher-centered activities which are low level and low engagement (Vogler, 2008). Thus, it is not surprising to see ethical

issues arise when testing and accountability are mandated by the state or federal government.

Vogler (2002) attempts to prove "if the public release of students results on high-stakes, state mandated performance assessments influence instructional practices" (p. 39). Results from surveyed teachers seems to support the notion that by posting test scores to the public, the teachers will change their instructional methods. Vogler (2002) found that "the results ... seem to indicate that the use of state-mandated student performance assessments and the high stakes attached to this type of testing program contributed to changes in teachers' instructional practices" as these changes have led to increases in what educational researchers deem as best practices (p. 50).

These findings may have influenced other states' development of and use of high-stakes testing. The results seem to be a positive for those seeking better teaching practices, which would include more learner-centered approaches. An increase in student journals, open-response questions and use of primary sources were noted (Vogler, 2002).

Vogler and Kennedy (2003) continue the discussion of the public reporting of scores on high-stakes assessments by recognizing that when school performs well on the state mandated assessments, accolades and rewards will follow. Yet if schools do not meet the standards, then action must be taken. In a heavily minority district with a large number of non-native English speakers, the scores were low, the high school was not accredited and the lack of stability at the district office has meant that the district has performed poorly on state-mandated tests. The solution was to increase test taking skills. Programs were purchased and time during the school day had to be allocated for the test-prep instruction. In fact, to make room in the daily schedule, the schools eliminated a

reading class that was to help students who speak English as a second language. The community would be judged on the test scores and "there seemed no choice but to implement the… test-prep programs" which "always comes at some cost" (Vogler & Kennedy, 2003, p. 11).

However, Vogler and Virtue (2007) posit that high-stakes testing in history ultimately does harm in instructing the social studies. Not only history teachers, but any teacher who is held accountable for state mandated assessments has experienced the issues the authors discuss. Issues regarding high-stakes testing range from the narrowing of the curriculum, to the pressure placed upon teachers by school administrators, to having to revamp the structure of their curriculum, and finally to the negative changes in teacher student relationships. Administrators at both the school and district levels should read the research and assure teachers that the true goal of accountability through testing will not be punitive, but rather serve the needs of the students though a reevaluation of deficiencies in the content standards.

Furthermore, Vogler and Virtue (2007) argue that even though "holding teachers responsible for the education of their students seems to be a legitimate practice" the ultimate consequences of high stakes testing has the potential to create students who can do little more than regurgitate facts (pg. 57).

Additionally, Vogler (2008) compared teaching methods of social studies teachers in Tennessee with those in Mississippi. Mississippi students are given a high stakes graduation assessment, whereas Tennessee students are taught the same content standards, yet their EOC is relatively low stakes. The premise is that in schools where the stakes are higher the classes are structured more around teacher-led instruction. Vogler

(2008) collected surveys of teachers who were asked to describe what types of activities they lead in class. He found that the "curriculum framework and accountability examination endorse a traditional, back-to-basics approach to social studies instruction" which focuses "on the accumulation of knowledge with little depth or context, generally works more efficiently when using teacher-centered rather than student-centered instructional practices" (Vogler, 2008, p. 24). The teaching ideology follows the accountability standards. Thus, conceptual knowledge cannot be transferred to students merely by teacher-led instruction, rather it requires students to construct it (Von Glasersfeld, 2013).

Having a teacher centered classroom is not necessarily harmful to these high school students. Unfortunately, the second issue that Vogler (2008) documented seemed to be more troublesome. He found that when teachers are faced with getting their students to perform on high stakes assessments they spend an inordinate amount of time reviewing for the specific test. In Tennessee, where the accountability test is not as important, 14.1% of teachers spent more than 2 months reviewing whereas in the high stakes setting of Mississippi, 61.9% of teachers spent more than 2 months. This is very telling because if a state places pressures on both students and teachers to perform well on a single high stakes test the teachers will concentrate heavily on test preparation. Moreover, the testing impacts the way the teachers themselves view the tests. Vogler (2008) notes that the driving forces behind teachers in schools dictated by test scores often have more interest in the students getting high scores to make the school or district look good, "were the most important factors influencing their instructional practices" (p. 26). In setting out to analyze why a teacher might forgo proven assessment methods of performance tasks, or

teach through more student-centered approaches, Vogler (2008) found evidence that teachers change the way they teach U.S. History based on the high importance of the state assessment.

The problem presented in classes where high stakes tests are mandated is that teachers resort to teacher-centered methods which negatively impacts engagement (Vogler, 2008). Constructivist teaching is present when students use prior knowledge to actively build new knowledge, a reconstruction of experiences (Sunal & Haas, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

Learner-centered School.

In the learner-centered classroom "the students, teacher, and curriculum developer share responsibility for what is occurring" (Schiro, 2013, p. 104). By working together, the teacher can act as an initiator of the student's learning. Thus, "by working together, students, teachers, and curriculum developers help make the ideal classroom of the learner-centered ideology possible" (Schiro, 2013, p. 104).

In learner-centered schools, the children are at the center, therefore their "needs and interests … rather than those of teachers, principals, school subjects, parents, or politicians, play a major role in determining the school program" (Schiro, 2013, p. 105). These child-centered schools revolve around developing the child as a whole, and see children as self-autonomous creatures who are independent thinkers.

The goal of learner-centered ideology "is to stimulate and nurture growth in students, teachers, and other involved in education… by helping students … create meaning for themselves" (Schiro, 2013, p. 132). To reach this goal the learner will create personalized connections. The learner constructs knowledge "because of the way newly

perceived information is transformed …into the learners' existing cognitive structures" (p. 141). Then the knowledge is reconstructed as the cognitive structures are updated with new information. The learner takes ownership of the knowledge because it has personalized meaning (Schiro, 2013).

Students enjoy this type of learning and remember more from experiential learning than from being restrained in a classroom desk (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Marshak, 2012). Von Glasersfeld (1989) states that "knowledge is never acquired passively," thus the construction of knowledge by the student is more powerful than passive learning (p. 136).

The learner-centered ideology continues the belief that children should find their own voice. Students will "develop unique meanings and ways of making meanings that are consistent with their cultural heritage, which in turn produces a more integrated, holistic, coherent, and powerful view of knowledge within the child" (Schiro, 2013, p. 243). The teacher will allow the students freedom to learn, in their own way, the content. Their construct of the topics is key as it will be infused with their own cultural relevance.

Unfortunately, with the advent of high stakes assessments, a return to an essentialist classroom has been pushed into public education by those seeking education reform (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006; Vogler, 2008).

Moreover, Eisner (2013b) argues that standards and rubrics are at the heart of school reform and accountability. These generalized statements are "intended to proclaim our values" (p. 279). Ultimately, the use of accountability testing is used to assess the schools themselves. When schools push towards these goals, the students can be left without the tools to succeed. Successful schools fail students when they do not allow for

experimentation. “Risk-taking, exploration, uncertainty, and speculation” are what real learning should be (p. 282). The standards movement has largely failed to reach those students who cannot follow “lockstep through a series of 10-month years in a standardized system” (p. 286). Thus, we will achieve less as students will continually be marginalized (Schiro, 2013; Wei, 2012).

Reformed Teaching

Constructivism and reformed teaching values inquiry-based instructional methods and active, student-centered learning (Amrein-Beardsley & Osborn Popp, 2012). In order to evaluate the degree of reformed teaching Piburn, Sawada, and Arizona State University (2000) developed specific protocols as a method of measuring “reformed” teaching. The Reformed Teaching Observation Protocol (RTOP) was developed through a collaboration of the Evaluation Facilitation Group (EFG) of the Arizona Collaborative for Excellence in the Preparation of Teachers (ACEPT) (Piburn, Sawada, & Arizona State University, 2000). The RTOP consists of 25 items used to elicit the amount of student-centered instruction. The 25 item RTOP items are scaled using a Likert method from 0 (never occurred) to 4 (very descriptive).

The 25 items are divided into 3 sections: *Lesson Design and Implementation (5), Content (10),* and *Classroom Culture (10*). Lesson Design and Implementation was developed with the intention of capturing information such as the teacher’s ability to access and respect the student’s prior knowledge, the amount of student engagement in a learning community, valuing the student’s ideas and direction while leading the student toward discovery and problem solving (Piburn, Sawada, & Arizona State University, 2000). The Content section was developed to score the quality of content and the amount

of propositional and procedural knowledge. The third section, Classroom Culture was used to determine the amount of student to student interactions as well as student to teacher interactions.

Self-reflection is a cornerstone of both action research (Mertler, 2014) and the RTOP (MacIsaac, Sawada, & Falconer, 2001). During a summer in-service, MacIsaac, Sawada, and Falconer (2001) used the guiding principles in the RTOP to help teachers learn to be self-reflective in their teaching practices. They found that the RTOP worked as a catalyst to drive reformed teaching and thus positively impact the classroom.

A study by Turley, Falconer, Benford, and Bloom (2002) of 153 classrooms that spanned two years found that highly reformed teachers experienced significant growth in student learning. The study observed math and sciences classrooms through a variety of public school grades and college settings and found positive correlations between reformed teaching and achievement. The RTOP was found to be highly predictive of student growth.

Activating Prior Knowledge

High stakes assessments have led to an increase in teacher-centered, content heavy yet, superficial classrooms (Pahl, 2003; Vogler, 2008). In order to foster deeper learning, the use of primary source documents and authentic assessments helps move the students toward developing historical thinking skills (Marshall & Klein, 2009; Patterson, Lucas, & Kithinji, 2012). Students who can think like historians and effectively use critical thinking skills can do better on higher level questions (Patterson, Lucas, & Kithinji, 2012).

Activation of prior knowledge is the first step in constructing contextual meaning, as it allows the student to connect what he or she already knows while applying it to new information in order to make it accessible (Alexander-Shea, 2011; Alvarez, 1990). However, activating prior knowledge is another challenge for students as many have very little content knowledge (Kostons, & Werf, 2015; Risko, & Alvarez, 1986). Wwhen presented with a text such as a primary source document it is very difficult to just get the students to fully comprehend the content embedded within the text. Comprehension is limited when prior knowledge is insufficient (McKenna & Robinson, 2014). Thus, where prior knowledge does not exist and no activation occurs new schema have a more difficult time being constructed (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987). Students will activate prior knowledge when constructing new schema (Alvarez, 1990). Therefore, enhancing a student's background knowledge helps in getting students to understand complex and abstract text (Risko, & Alvarez, 1986).

Increasing the students understanding of content vocabulary is needed if the student is to fully understand the content (McKenna & Robinson, 2014, Armbruster, & Nagy, 1992; Ryder & Hughes, 2001). The limited time and increasing content being taught places limitations on the teacher's ability to specifically teach content vocabulary (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013).

Kostons and Werf (2015) studied the effectiveness of prior knowledge on reading comprehension. They found that while there is a clear link between activation and increased comprehension, a student with little prior knowledge may not be able to or know how to activate cognitive processes. Therefore, guiding the students toward building upon prior knowledge is important if many students lack content knowledge.

Further, Walraven and Reitsma (1992) studied the effectiveness of activating prior knowledge on students with reading problems. The results showed that teaching certain reading strategies produces incidental activation of prior knowledge. Students in the study were found to use prior knowledge they found in the title, pictures, and topic sentences in order to make predictions within the text.

Shanahan and Shanahan (2014) argue that disciplinary literacy is key to moving forward with greater content knowledge, especially when considering that different content areas often approach literacy in different ways. Specifically, to effectively teach disciplinary vocabulary, the instruction must be anchored within the class with elements of the discipline constructed through precise skills required to acquire the content knowledge (Fang & Coatoam, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative that students must gain key content vocabulary skills first before they can gain the skills needed to succeed in specific areas or disciplines.

Vocabulary comprehension in social studies is one of the biggest impediments in students learning (Alexander-Shea, 2011). Therefore, building content specific keyword knowledge is necessary to understand discipline specific readings and content (Larson, Dixon, & Townsend, 2013). Preteaching vocabulary through activating prior knowledge helps in overall content and vocabulary comprehension (Berg, & Wehby, 2013; Hairrell, Simmons, Swanson, Edmonds, Vaughn, & Rupley, 2011).

Swanson and Wanzek (2014) looked at the difficulties of social studies teachers' ability to increase reading comprehension and content knowledge through disciplinary vocabulary teaching. They contend that focusing on keywords before attempting to read historical text, including primary source documents, enables the learner to better

comprehend the passage. The reading is done with frequent pauses where the teacher asks students for understanding and clarification before continuing. These strategies appear to be effective when working with struggling readers.

Disciplinary Literacy in Social Studies

In a social studies classroom, a teacher instructs vocabulary differently as it requires more specialized study of placing the text in the proper context (i.e. historical time period, author, type and purpose of document (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Disciplinary vocabulary emphasizes expression of words that students use to create and communicate within that specific discipline (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

The link between historical thinking and content knowledge is apparent; the more content is understood the student will more likely be able to think critically when presented with historical documents. (Wineburg, 2007). Some questions on state-mandated assessments require higher level thinking and analysis of documents in order to answer the higher-level questions. Proper analysis of primary source documents fosters high order thinking (Patterson, Lucas, & Kithinji, 2012). Getting students past the multiple-choice questions and focusing on teaching critical historical thinking requires the students to develop a knowledge of key content vocabulary and to be able to apply that knowledge to discipline specific activities (Breakstone, 2014).

Unfortunately, poor literacy skills and limited content vocabulary impedes the students' ability to exhibit mastery of higher level questions and limits them not only from understanding the content readings, but negatively impacts their attainment of content knowledge (Allen, 2014). High stakes exams require students to fully understand

content, and an increased vocabulary knowledge can result in high scores (Cowgill II, 2015; Turner, & Williams, 2007; Wakeman, 2013).

Comprehension of disciplinary specific texts is hindered if students lack adequate vocabulary knowledge (Daskalovska, 2014; Larson, Dixon, & Townsend, 2013; Schwartz, 1988; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2016). U.S. History is a content heavy course where the knowledge of specific disciplinary keywords and vocabulary is needed to do well (Alexander-Shea, 2011). Simultaneously activating prior knowledge is difficult if the constraints of class time and ever-increasing content standards must betaught. Students with limited content vocabulary knowledge have difficulty in understanding specific content (Alexander-Shea, 2011; Cuevas, Irving, & Russell, 2014). Many social studies textbooks are referred to as *inconsiderate* text due to the fact that they are difficult to read for some students (Armbruster, & Anderson, 1981; Simmons, Hairrell, Edmonds, Vaughn, Larsen, Willson, Rupley, & Byrns, 2010). A considerate text is one that requires little cognitive effort on the part of the reader to comprehend versus an inconsiderate text that "requires more effort, skill, strategy and prior knowledge to comprehend" (Armbruster, & Anderson, 1981, p. 6). For many students who have difficulties reading, much of what they read in the content areas can be considered inconsiderate. Therefore, activating prior knowledge is necessary to help the students navigate these texts (McKenna & Robinson, 2014).

Furthermore, texts in the social studies classroom often rely on the ability to read primary sources that often require the students to recognize technical or archaic vocabulary (Wilson, 2011). The readings are presented in forms different from just expository writing. Primary source documents can present a certain bias which forces the

students to not only read for content but to analyze subjectivity (Myers, 2005). Moreover, primary source documents require students to draw conclusions from the document and to know key disciplinary vocabulary. Without prior knowledge they cannot explicate opposing historical points of view (Wilson, 2011).

In order to understand key content vocabulary and complex text, the student must construct knowledge using previously learned content, so they are able to process and make connections with the newly acquired material (Blachowicz, 1993; McKenna, & Robinson, 2014; Schwartz, 1988). Before content can be taught, understanding key words is important so the student can make these connections between prior knowledge and new content (McKenna, & Robinson, 2014). This is done through the careful selection of explanation of certain keywords that are highlighted so they become familiar. The keywords will enhance the student's background knowledge (McKenna, & Robinson, 2014). By understanding the relationships between content and disciplinary vocabulary, the student is able to construct new concepts that bridge the divide between the word, its meaning and the greater application to specific content (Anders, & Bos, 1986; Armbruster, & Nagy, 1992).

Factual knowledge is needed for students to perform well on high-stakes testing (McKenna, & Robinson, 2014; Turner, & Williams, 2007). Even though using context can be useful in learning new vocabulary (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987), it is often not enough to allow the students to discover the disciplinary meaning (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002; Sun, Zhang, & Scardamalia, 2010), especially when it comes to disciplinary specific vocabulary.

Vocabulary instruction is an important piece in overall content comprehension (Graham, Graham, & West, 2015; Larson, Dixon, & Townsend, 2013; Schwartz, 1988; Sun, Zhang, & Scardamalia, 2010). In a report of studies based on vocabulary instruction and comprehension, Stahl and Fairbanks (1986), completed an exhaustive meta-analysis comparing the two. They found that there was a clear connection between vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension of passages with taught words, and a small increase in reading comprehension with reading passages containing untaught words. This leads to the conclusion that the more vocabulary a student masters the easier it will become to obtain further vocabulary acquisition. Implications gleaned from this study imply that student comprehension of key content vocabulary will lead to further understandings of key historical concepts where disciplinary vocabulary is necessary for success.

Importance of Reading Comprehension.

The following three articles all address the relationship between reading comprehension levels and their impact on learning in social studies content areas. Vaughn et al. (2013) conducted a study of 419 students by five teachers. The study consisted of students in a treatment group (n=261) and the control group (n=158). All students were provided the same content material based on state standards. However, the treatment group "were provided social studies content instruction that focused on text-based reading as well as using the text as a data source for addressing key ideas and issues (Vaughn et al., 2013). The researchers ultimately discovered that changes in content delivery yielded a significant improvement in content knowledge.

Swanson et al. (2015) conducted a study of 130 students where the control group (n=58) received the instruction in the content standards while the treatment group (n=72) received the same content instruction. However, the treatment groups included interventions consisting of "five components of instruction that focus on improving comprehension through text reading, connecting new text-based learning to prior learning, and applying new knowledge to unique problem-solving activities completed in cooperative groups" (Swanson et al., 2015, p. 427). The results found that the treatment groups gained in social studies content knowledge yet did not gain in reading comprehension. Therefore, the experiment seemed effective in adding specific content knowledge rather than increasing literacy.

Finally, Vaughn et al. (2015) continue the discussion of the effects of specific reading interventions on content learning. This study included 375 students where the control group (n=205) received no extra interventions while the treatment group (n=170) received help with reading strategies. The results were similar to the previous studies where the treatment group "was also associated with improved grades in social studies" and improved reading comprehension. (Vaughn et al., 2015).

Overall, all three studies were very similar and were conducted by a cross section of many of the same researchers. All three of the experiments conducted above used quantitative research techniques to gather results, had large sample sizes and included several teachers who were observed for fidelity with regards to the treatment strategies. An experimenter must check to see if the individual teachers are in fact using the treatment program to ensure fidelity.

Allen (2014) determined a correlation between a student's Lexile score and Biology end of course assessment score. This quantitative correlational study "suggest[s] that any measure to increase reading levels would increase standardized biology assessment scores" (Allen, 2014, p. 247). The study was based on students from an urban high school in Indianapolis, Indiana. The sample size was 513 students, where 512 received End of course assessment scores; whereas 446 of the sample had corresponding Lexile scores. Through analysis using a scatterplot, a positive correlation was evident, with the correlation coefficient being r=0.712. The conclusion that linking EOC scores with reading levels gives reason to believe that increasing a student's key content vocabulary and reading comprehension of historical documents could lead to increased student achievement, which is also supported by Cowgill II (2015).

Assessment and Engagement.

Engagement is essential for success in schools (Newman, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). Brookhart and Durkin (2003) looked at student motivation in smaller classroom assessments that occur more frequently than the end of chapter or unit exams. They examined the perception of various types of assessments given to students. Ultimately, they concluded that "performance assessments were associated with higher student self-efficacy than that associated with tests" and "were associated with a positive relationship between mastery and performance goal orientations" (p. 52). Therefore, selected response exams have a purpose and must be used, but to properly motivate students to get them to want to learn and take ownership in their education, more student inclusive assessments and group activities are warranted.

The quantifiable study by Brookhart and Durkin (2003) analyzed multiple performance assessments within a social studies classroom. There were two main points that stand out. First is that motivation and self-efficacy greatly impact learning. Second, that group performance assessments seemed to work well as "students talked about wanting to help others or to learn from others" (p. 52). The results show a clear foundation for the effectiveness of peer group activities.

Ilter (2014) conducted an experiment to see if social studies students could be more motivated to learn. Using the constructivist approach and involving the students will increase motivation. The study involved students working on a project-based learning activity within teams. This group-based activity "was found to create more positive effects on students' conceptual achievement and motivation to succeed academically" (p. 495). Furthermore, Ilter (2014) found that "constructivist learning environments in social studies education helped students gain meaningful experiences" and "that students learn better by actively constructing their knowledge through projects with peers" (p. 495). The constructivist model both increased engagement and depth of learning.

Gündoğdu (2015) studied the effectiveness of using differing types of assessments on pre-service teachers. Even though the treatment group consist of student teachers, the results are useful. Gündoğdu (2015) found that while using the constructivist methodology, students learned more and were more engaged. When working within a group setting, the students were at first apprehensive but soon "gained self and mutual trust through the assessment process" (p. 58). Constructivist activities, group work and authentic assessments were shown to be more effective within this study.

Wiersma (2008) analyzed the teaching methods of three high school social studies teachers. She found that, even though many history teachers still use traditional methods, when it comes to "questions that require deeper thinking by the students" the three teachers in the study use constructivist approaches to allow the "students to think more deeply and gain a better understanding of history (p. 116). The constructivist approach was demonstrated by all three teachers who "used sources other than the textbook as learning tools, including video clips, letters, party platform documents, and speeches" in a structured but student-centered way (p. 116).

Effectiveness of Peer Groups.

Teachers use formative assessments to guide instruction on an on-going basis. This can be very time consuming, but it can be a valuable tool in getting the students to not only be learners but critical thinkers (Dirksen, 2011). Furthermore, having the students control formative assessments allows the students to become self-directed learners and guides instruction. (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). By taking ownership of the assessment process the students will be able to allow the teacher to help hone their skills and ultimately progress toward the learning objectives. Peer teaching is an effective way for students to learn (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Marshak, 2012; Tjalla, & Sofiah, 2015, Vaughn et al., 2009).

Alpaya, Cutler, Eisenbach, & Field (2010) studied the effectiveness of peer led groups. Even though a study done by the Imperial College of London was meant for first year university students, the results are very telling and applicable to high schools. The shift from a summative grade-based model to a formative based model was accomplished by putting students in small groups with peer leaders who helped guide instruction. The

results showed that instituting a classroom based on this model could result in wider student participation and motivation, seemingly because they viewed the peer leaders as role models who were like themselves. It was proven that as participation by students increased greater engagement occurred, whether the assignments were graded or not (Alpaya, Cutler, Eisenbach & Field, 2010).

The key to transforming the culture of the classroom to reflect a formative approach is moving away from a teacher-centered summative methodology to a student-centered arrangement (Dirksen, 2011). Rushton (2005) suggests that the key to a proper culture of formative assessment is feedback which will enable a deeper level of learning. These formative assessments not only help student learning but "necessitates a further move away from the current emphasis on procedures and products of assessment to an emphasis on the processes of assessment and learning" (p. 512). The informal feedback given by teachers and other students within the group more effectively impacts the students learning.

Chen (2015) analyzes the importance of using formative assessments as part of instruction "embedded in teaching and it should be conducted seamlessly as part of instructional activities" (p. 755). Even though the analysis was concerning schools in China, the heavy use of government sponsored standardized summative assessments in a way mimics what is seen in US public schools. Chen (2015) argues to change the way formative assessments are used will help lead to an overall epistemological change in the command oriented Chinese education system. The teacher must undergo a change in philosophy and learn to use assessments as a way to guide instruction more effectively.

Ultimately, teachers should use formative assessments as "information about [how] learning is managed and used" (Chen, 2015, p. 754).

In a study completed by Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Marshak (2012), the results found that not only were students more engaged in the activities, and enjoyed learning within peer groups, the study linked peer groups with increased content learning. Furthermore, Tjalla, & Sofiah, (2015) found that peer teaching has a greater effect on learning than a teacher-centered approach. Although, students with low self-regulation did not appear to learn within their groups, Tjalla, & Sofiah (2015) claim that if high achieving students are paired with the low self-regulating ones, "students who are underachieving can overcome underdevelopment" (p. 20). Thus, peer grouping can help students attain understanding more quickly.

In conclusion, the basis for any shift towards a change in culture has to be managed by the teacher who allows the students to take ownership of their learning, and guides the students toward higher order critical thinking. The belief is that as the students take ownership of the learning, only then can they appreciate what they are to learn, think more critically, and learn to problem solve, as it helps to change the student's mindset and motivate the student more intrinsically (Alpay, Cutler, Eisenbach, & Field, 2010).

Use of Graphic Organizers

Two studies by Vaughn, Martinez, Linan-Thompson, Reutebuch, Carlson, & Francis (2009) attempt to show that explicit vocabulary instruction impacts students' understanding of social studies. They found that the use of graphic organizers and peer-pairing helps build content knowledge. Furthermore, they found that the use of graphic organizers helped support learners' acquisition of the content area's major topics which

promoted understanding of the content (Vaughn et al., 2009). Peer-pairing increased student engagement which led Vaughn et al. (2009) to surmise that higher engagement alone may have led to increased learning.

Enhancing vocabulary acquisition by specifically working with text through activities is effective (Wesche, & Paribakht, 1994). Moreover, the use of graphic organizers is an effective way of learning vocabulary (Alexander-Shea, 2011; Gillis, 2015; Ilter, 2016; McKenna, & Robinson, 2014; Alverman, 1981; Cassidy, 1989). Graphic organizers allow a student to become familiar with disciplinary vocabulary, and familiarity enhances the student's ability to produce meaningful comprehension of the word (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987). Graphic organizers are a cognitive representation of certain main ideas or key words, so the student can deconstruct the meanings in order to construct understanding by breaking down the topic or word (Cassidy, 1989). Graphic organizers also aid students in developing critical thinking skills (Bellanca, 2007; Cassidy, 1989; Drapeau, 2008).

There is no shortage of effective graphic organizers. Relevant to this study, Gillis (2015) describes various ways of constructing meanings of vocabulary words, including the four-quadrant graphic organizer. For this action research study, the student will divide a paper into four quadrants as each quadrant will be designed for a specific type of information. These could include the actual formal definition, a student's own interpretation, an illustration, examples, non-examples, etc. Thus, in order for students to understand its context they must take ownership of a keyword and be able to construct the appropriate disciplinary meaning and its relation to said discipline (Gillis, 2015). The

importance of student involvement in construction is essential if the key word is to be learned and applied to any future learning.

Using graphic organizers could be effective as it gives the students an anchoring platform to help embed the knowledge (Alverman, 1981). Anchoring is needed to break down the word's literal meaning and allow the student to develop a contextual and discipline specific meaning (Manyak, Gunten, Autenrieth, Gillis, Mastre-O'Farrell, Irvine-McDermott, Baumann, & Blachowicz, 2014)

Ilter (2002) studied the effectiveness of graphic organizers on the contextual understanding of vocabulary. This quasi-experimental study found that using graphic organizers to learn vocabulary not only enhances student enjoyment but also understanding. In fact, Ilter (2002) states that using graphic organizers to help students acquire vocabulary "had substantial effects on participants' word-learning process in social studies" (p. 57). Although, Ilter (2002) showed that the learning of new words increased, it may be because student engagement in the act of creating the graphic organizers elicited more enjoyment and thus help with vocabulary acquisition.

The impact of using organizers is shown to be an effective tool for students in a study by Risko and Alvarez (1986). They found that the understanding of implicit information within a text was greater when the students used a thematic organizer. The study links the increased comprehension to the fact that the more difficult text was activated through the completion of the organizer.

One of the components included in the graphic organizer can be artwork - either created by the student or copied from another source (Manyak et al., 2014). These can prove invaluable to making connections between meaning and the vocabulary word as

students work to create complex connections between concepts and keywords (Sun, Zhang, & Scardamalia, 2010). Art specific "activities engage representational, communicative, expressive, and social capacities that can stimulate new shifts in …awareness, perception, and thought" (Phillips, Gorton, Pinciotti, & Sachdev, 2010, pg. 111). Artistic activities can be especially helpful when used by students with limited access to English, or those with low literacy skills as they work to create connections between their understanding and the content (Phillips, Gorton, Pinciotti, & Sachdev, 2010).

Furthermore, injecting art into social studies not only helps with construction of content, but is seen as an effective tool to promote social justice (Zwirn, & Libresco, 2010). Zwirn and Libresco (2010) claim that bringing the arts into history classes allows for a more wide-ranging and diverse set of materials. The explication and analysis of art as it relates to history helps in developing critical thinking which "nurture[s] an informed citizenry" because "art stimulates emotional connections to the past and understanding in unique and profound ways that can never be duplicated by mere words or graphs" (p. 35). Students who are more aware of their culture and society in general are inculcated into the ideals of social justice.

Conceptual Vocabulary Through Illustration

The Frayer model of vocabulary instruction designed by Frayer, Frederick, and Klausmeier (1969) has been proven effective. Proper vocabulary acquisition and understanding usually leads to more successful learning (Allen, 2014; Christ, Wang, & Ryan, 2010). Students who create illustrations are conceptualizing the vocabulary and processing the word meaning, which leads to better understanding (Alexander-Shea,

2001; Naughton, 2008; Rakes, Rakes, & Smith, 1995). Students who actively participate in creating word meanings retain more (Greenwood, 2002). Gillis (2015) states that in order for students "to own a term, to be able to use it appropriately, [they] must develop relational knowledge, that is, they must know multiple dimensions of a word's meaning and how that word is related to other words in the conceptual domain" (p. 285). The importance of student involvement in construction is essential if the key word is to be learned and applied to any future learning.

Research by Peters (1974) has shown that student use of the Frayer model in vocabulary comprehension significantly led to increases in comprehension for both strong and weak readers. More recently, Palmer, Boon, and Spencer (2014) replicated a study that attempted to show vocabulary gains in comprehension by comparing traditional dictionary-based approaches versus concept mapping based on the Frayer model. Palmer, Boon, and Spencer's (2014) study included students with mild learning disabilities and was shown to positively impact their understanding of the vocabulary terms through the use Frayer model.

Moreover, the goal of this action research study is to increase vocabulary comprehension through analysis of historical documents in hopes of translating this with higher standardized test scores. The following four studies attempt to link reading comprehension and increased vocabulary acquisition as a means to increase test scores.

First, in *Improving Reading Comprehension and Social Studies Knowledge in Middle School* by Vaughn et al. (2013) a study of 419 students by 5 teachers was conducted. The treatment group was "provided social studies content instruction that focused on text-based reading as well as using the text as a data source for addressing key

ideas and issues" (Vaughn et al., 2013, p. 90). The researchers ultimately discovered that changes in content delivery yielded a significant improvement in content knowledge.

In *Improving Reading Comprehension and Social Studies Knowledge Among Middle School Students with Disabilities,* Swanson, Wanzek, Vaughn, Roberts, and Fall (2015) conducted a study of 130 students, where the control group (n=58) received the instruction in the content standards while the treatment group (n=72) received the same content instruction. However, the treatment groups included interventions consisting of "five components of instruction that focus on improving comprehension through text reading, connecting new text-based learning to prior learning, and applying new knowledge to unique problem-solving activities completed in cooperative groups" (Swanson et al., 2015, p. 427). The results found that the treatment groups gained in social studies content knowledge yet did not gain in reading comprehension. Therefore, the experiment seemed effective in adding specific content knowledge rather than increasing literacy.

Finally, in *High School Students with Reading Comprehension Difficulties: Results of a Randomized Control Trial of a Two-Year Reading Intervention*, Vaughn et al. (2015) continue the discussion of the effects of specific reading interventions and their impact on content learning. This study included 375 students where the control group (n=205) received no extra interventions while the treatment group (n=170) received help with reading strategies. The results were similar to the previous studies where the treatment group "was also associated with improved grades in social studies" and improved reading comprehension. (Vaughn, 2015, p. 456). Overall, all three studies were very similar and were conducted by a cross section of many of the same researchers, and

all found that specific interventions in reading and vocabulary instruction led to increased achievement.

The teacher researcher needs to study the types of authentic assessments available in a social studies class. A common form of assessment is the Document Based Question (DBQ). Suh and Grant (2014) analyzed the use of historical documents in US History. They surmised that through "using historical knowledge, students are expected to interpret the meaning of primary sources (e.g., speeches, letters, diaries, quantitative materials, political cartoons, photos, and paintings) and relate the meaning of the sources to the historical context" (p. 72). Specifically referring to visual images, Suh and Grant found that the analysis of this type of document can make complex ideas more accessible to students with reading difficulties. (2014).

Moreover, Grant, Gradwell, and Cimbricz (2004) studied the design of a DBQ and how such design often requires analysis and interpretation of historical documents which would lead to a more critical understanding of the content. The DBQ stands as an authentic assessment as it often calls for synthesis and analysis of the material through a more student-centered approach.

Critical Thinking Through Authentic Assessments

Disciplinary vocabulary knowledge is needed to understand authentic text and to perform well on assessments. Authentic assessments lead to more self-efficacy (Alkharusi, Aldhafri, Alnabhani, & Alkalbani, 2014) and engagement (Newman, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992) among students. The use of authentic processes enables the students to construct connections between what they have already learned and new

concepts (Alvarez, 1990). Critical thinking in social studies requires the ability to analyze primary source documents in a disciplinary-specific approach (Wineburg, 2007).

However, standardized test questions are almost universally selected response questions (Vogler, 2008), and have been shown to result in gap in achievement from students from a high poverty school (Dunn, 1999). These specific types of questions do not allow students from struggling schools to show their best as the type of assessments given are not varied. Furthermore, the multiple-choice questions do not further the ideals of social justice in the educational setting. They do not give the students the ability to explore and learn for themselves, or to make comparisons or connections with their own experiences. Even though selected response questions can elicit critical thinking, they often do not (Au, 2007). When given a primary source to analyze, the questions do require some analysis by the student and the answer is not clear-cut memorization (, Cowgill II, 2015; Marshall & Klein, 2009). So the student is forced to reason and use conceptual knowledge (Patterson, Lucas, & Kithinji, 2012). DBQs promote critical thinking (Breakstone, Smith, & Wineburg, 2013; Breakstone, 2014).

Stoel, Van Drie, & Van Boxtel (2015) studied students' ability to make causal reasonings about history. In their study, an activity that activated prior knowledge was presented. The students were asked to collaborate and discuss the inquiry questions in order "to elicit causal historical reasoning" (p. 61). Then they were asked to explain causation which helped develop deeper thinking. The results showed an increase in causal reasoning and construction of historical critical thinking skills. The study continues to support that both collaborative efforts among students and the teaching of historical inquiry benefits students' ability to grasp high level concepts.

Dutt-Doner, Cook-Cottone, and Allen (2007) studied the necessary skill set to analyze documents and attempted to determine what skills are more useful. The students were given documents to study and construct content knowledge from their analysis. Dutt-Doner, Cook-Cottone, and Allen (2007) found that having the students just look at documents without prior knowledge "may not facilitate a deep understanding of the historical event" as the students "reflect[ed] only basic observations, limited integration, and little if any historical understanding (p. 14). The study compared fifth and seventh graders on their analysis and found that as students get into middle school their content knowledge grows and they are better able to analyze documents. Also, the seventh graders could better distinguish the context of the documents while the fifth graders assumed everything they read, or saw, was the truth without reservations. Therefore, to have students appropriately construct knowledge from documents, some background knowledge would be necessary to gain a better understanding.

The DBQ is the heart of critical thinking for social studies classrooms as it requires the students to effectively analyze primary source documents, make connections between them and create a convincing argument based on the inquiry (Breakstone, Smith, & Wineburg, 2013; Myers, 2005). Further, the discussion has led to the development of formative assessments that rely on the construct of historical knowledge (Breakstone, 2014; Breakstone, Smith, & Wineburg, 2013). Attainment of historical knowledge demands the students move beyond the typical multiple choice, factual content knowledge and learn application and relational connectivity to other events (Breakstone, 2014).

Grant, Gradwell, and Cimbricz (2004) studied the design of a DBQ and how such design often requires analysis and interpretation of historical documents which would lead to a more critical understanding of the content. The DBQ stands as a more authentic assessment as it often calls for synthesis and analysis of the material through a more student-centered approach. They found that most schools' assessments are inauthentic and have little relevance to the students' learning except to see what they know and can prove in order to get a grade. The DBQ allows the learner to construct knowledge from analyzing primary sources and, while the students construct this knowledge, they are making a deeper connection to it. The main issue concerning the DBQ, according to Grant, Gradwell, and Cimbricz (2004), is how the DBQ is developed and for what purpose. They found that many DBQs do not represent authentic assessments, but the mere fact that DBQs are being used may be a way to crack the stranglehold of selected-response-only that are seen in state-mandated tests.

Recognizing the importance of the DBQ as a true authentic assessment, Myers (2005) argues that the DBQ is being relegated and thus is harming true learning. Myers (2015) states that the DBQ is at odds with two main issues. Firstly, "large scale standardized testing satisfies demands for accountability" which limits authentic assessments (p. 2). Secondly, teachers use multiple choice questions because of the ease of grading, rather than taking the time to implement DBQs. The conclusion amounts to the fact that state-mandated tests will not create true DBQs but will, and already have, developed multiple choice questions that require the student to read and analyze the documents.

Social Justice

High poverty schools have traditionally done poorly on high stakes assessments leading to a gap in achievement in schools (Dunn,1999; Noguera, 2001; Wei, 2012). The lack of cultural proficiency (Guerra, & Nelson, 2007) requires schools to be culturally responsive to the needs of students (McKenna, & Robinson, 2014).

Making connections and understanding the strengths and challenges is the crux of knowing what your students need. Knowing your students' reading ability and readability are significant factors that can allow students to access text-based activities in a more successful way. Teachers must learn about their students, which helps guide instruction, yet knowing your students involves more than just ability groupings (McKenna & Robinson, 2014). Teachers need to assess themselves in terms of diversity and note similarities and differences between them and the students they teach. Diminishing issues of diversity not only limits effective instruction but endangers these students by discounting their contributions (McKenna & Robinson, 2014). Social justice in education requires the teacher to be accountable to all students.

Obtaining disciplinary literacy is a challenge to those seeking social justice (Fránquiz, & Salinas, 2013). Fránquiz, and Salinas (2013) studied the importance of analyzing primary source documents emphasizing historical reasoning. They found that as the students developed disciplinary literacy by creating authentic tasks, like writing a telegram or letter advocating a social justice position, the students gained in general academic literacy and historical knowledge. As English language learners, the students developed empathy and felt they could express their beliefs while constructing content knowledge.

Preteaching with the use of graphic organizers has shown to help at-risk students (Berg, & Wehby, 2013; Vaughn et al., 2009). The use of graphic organizers is effective at differentiating instruction and aids in providing access to content knowledge. Moreover, authentic work has the supposition of working in tandem with socially responsible curriculum. Learning that is based on meaningful and valuable concepts more effectively reaches students (Wehlage, & Smith, 1992).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was seen as a panacea to equalize achievement in all schools – especially high-poverty and minority ones. Arce, Luna, Borjian, and Conrad (2005) describe the implantation of NCLB and attempt to show that instead of raising learning levels, it actually disadvantages districts and students, especially minorities. Thus, the essentialist classroom does a disservice to minority students.

In a high poverty, racially diverse school, such is WHHS, the current essentialist teaching methods are not engaging to students. An analysis of several studies indicates that making strides to close the achievement gap is possible through the increased engagement that is present in constructivist, student-led classrooms (Braun, Chapman, & Vezzu, 2010; Corcoran and Silander, 2009).

Braun, Chapman, and Vezzu (2010) study how changes in instructional methods and policies must evolve if equality in education is to be reached. The authors studied the effectiveness of standardized tests on closing the black-white achievement gap between students. Using the processes that were imposed under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the authors found that only modest improvements on closing the achievement gap were met. Pushing essentialist ideology and high-stakes assessments has done little to help students of color and those from high poverty areas.

Additionally, Corcoran and Silander (2009) looked at the effectiveness of the instructional model in high schools. They found that the push for high achievement of all students has not necessarily changed the way high schools are organized. They claim that creating a more student-centered learning environment that caters to individual students would generate greater achievement. These two studies show that attempts to change outcomes have produced some positive results by creating a more equal and democratic learning environment

Evaluating the impact of self-worth on academic achievement is at the center of the study by Singh, Chang, and Dika (2010). They propose the idea that self-concept, school belonging, and engagement were correlated to achievement. Through their study, they found the importance of building communities of learners and creating schools where students feel a sense of attachment. If schools can create a learning environment where students feel empowered through interactions with teachers, including clear and consistent policies, students will take more ownership and thus achieve more.

In order "to design effective instruction, the designer must concentrate on how to present each objective in a manner that will help the learner achieve the objective" (Morrison, Ross, Kalman, & Kemp, 2013, p. 152). Therefore, teachers must design instruction that effectively conveys the information, so the students can meet or exceed the objectives. Morrison, Ross, Kalman, & Kemp (2013) also describe what they label as the "10% solution". Following these guidelines, the students retain about 10% of lectures but will remember most of what they "do". Thus, designing instruction where the students are actively engaged in learner-centered activities – essentially more "doing" and less receiving – is a more effective way to engage learners.

Designing instruction that is inclusive of all students through empowerment is the cornerstone of social justice education. Hytten and Bettez (2011) note that no single definition of social justice exists yet there are varied philosophical views of its goals. These further explain that there are a myriad of ways to approach the issue of a truly democratic education that pushes back against inequality to further social ideals that empower all students.

Hytten and Bettez (2011) explain that teaching preparation programs and educational systems should operate with the purpose of presenting curriculum and understandings of "culturally responsive schools" (p. 8). In the social studies classroom, social justice pedagogy refers to teaching culturally relevant materials, striving for a more democratic education, and understanding the importance of multicultural issues within the current school climate. Therefore, with inclusion of social justice ideals, the social studies teacher can help close the achievement gap through increased student engagement that is present in constructivist classrooms.

With the imposition of high-stakes accountability standards-based curriculum it is often difficult to approach teaching in a culturally relevant and engaging way. Dover, Henning, and Agarwal-Rangnath (2016) studied teachers' inclusion of social justice and democratic ideals into their teaching. They found that when teachers knew their students they could address specific and localized needs while keeping academic rigor aligned in their curriculum. The students were challenged to think critically about their local communities and how they relate to an overall picture of the social sciences. Moreover, when teachers embrace a more democratic education and inculcate these lessons with state mandated standards, they not only exceed their objectives but were found to offer

higher-order activities intended to engage the student in a more culturally responsible manner. Furthermore, Dover, Henning, and Agarwal-Rangnath (2016) "are acutely aware of the challenges associated with teaching critically in the current educational climate" and realize that it takes a brave teacher to challenge the educational status quo (p. 465). Unfortunately, it is difficult for many teachers to take the necessary steps to fight the disempowering top-down approach of the modern educational system.

Finally, Singh, Chang, and Dika (2010) observed that evaluating the impact of self -worth on academic achievement is crucial in helping minority students succeed. They present evidence that self-concept, school belonging, and engagement are correlated to achievement. Through their study, they found the importance of building communities of learners and creating schools where students feel a sense of attachment. If schools can create a learning environment where students feel empowered through interactions with teachers, including clear and consistent policies, students will take more ownership and thus achieve more. These classrooms that combine the issues of cultural understandings and relevant themes build toward a real democratic education. In the reformed classroom, building of communities and respect for others is a key metric within the reformed classroom.

Democratic Education

One of the main ideas of social justice education is based in the belief that every person has the right to be educated and play a part in their own education. Increasing general literacy is a key component in giving all students equal access to opportunities, as well as allowing the classroom to be modeled through a constructivist philosophy. Moreover, creating a student-led classroom by "honoring and valuing student voice

through input, feedback, and authenticity is a pedagogical practice that embodies social justice and decentralizes teacher-centric authority. It is democratic." (Bond & Chernoff, 2015, p. 28). This furthers the belief of Dewey's progressivist approach and is an essential belief in promoting the belief that students need to take ownership of their own education (Popkewitz, 1998). Enabling students to take charge of their education is the foundation of a democratic education (Hartman, Neame, & Gedro, 2014).

The social studies have historically been the subject where cultural responsiveness has been presented. However, since the introduction of standards driven high stakes testing, issues surrounding the teaching of social justice ideals have been replaced by the need to teach the required content (Johnson, Oppenheim, & Suh, 2009). By linking a culturally responsive classroom with one that allows for the student-led exploration of cultural issues teachers will grant a certain amount of democratic autonomy to the student, thus making learning more relevant. The results of the state mandated assessments have produced clear evidence of an achievement gap when it comes to test scores.

Therefore, in order to effectively teach students of color and with a lower socio-economic status, the teacher must not only be conscious of the student's self-identity and be inclusive of culturally relevant material, but allow the student to direct their own learning. The reformed teaching model calls for student-led exploration. Furthermore, Brown and Brown (2011) argue that in order to effectively teach students of color who might ask "what does history have to do with me?" the teacher must allow the student to self-reflect and make connections between their own lives and past historical events. This may be accomplished by engaging these students in critical thinking exercises through

examination of personal experiences and by giving them the power to decide how to approach the overall content objectives by allowing the student to direct the learning.

Conclusion

If students are to be successful in activities requiring higher level thinking they must be able to comprehend disciplinary text (Kostons & Werf, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). In order to help students with reading comprehension, content vocabulary must be learned (Berg, & Wehby, 2013; Fang & Coatoam, 2013; Hairrell, Simmons, Swanson, Edmonds, Vaughn, & Rupley, 2011; Larson, Dixon, & Townsend, 2013).

Primary sources are effective in developing critical thinking skills (Marshall & Klein, 2009). But before students can begin to analyze disciplinary texts and primary sources, they need to learn the key content vocabulary in order to make connections and construct increasingly difficult ideas. (Anders, & Bos, 1986; Armbruster & Nagy, 1992; McKenna & Robinson, 2014). Furthermore, vocabulary mastery leads to better comprehension of text (Graham, Graham, & West, 2015; Larson, Dixon, & Townsend, 2013; Schwartz, 1988; Sun, Zhang, & Scardamalia, 2010) and an increase in understanding complex texts (Patterson, Lucas, & Kithinji, 2012). Additionally, increased vocabulary knowledge is shown to increase reading comprehension (Swanson et al., 2015; Vaughn et al., 2013; Vaughn et al., 2015)

Student engagement is important as it is shown to help with learning (Brookhart and Durkin, 2003; Newman, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992), as is the use of peer groups (Alpaya, Cutler, Eisenbach, & Field,2010; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Marshak, 2012; Tjalla, & Sofiah, 2015; Vaughn et al., 2009). The use of graphic organizers is especially

effective in understanding disciplinary vocabulary because it allows the student to make relational connections amongst concepts (Alexander-Shea, 2011; Alverman, 1981; Bellanca, 2007; Cassidy, 1989; Drapeau, 2008; Gillis, 2015; Ilter, 2016; McKenna, & Robinson, 2014; Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987; Vaughn, Martinez, Linan-Thompson, Reutebuch, Carlson, & Francis, 2009)

Therefore, as teachers are driven by high-stakes testing, their classrooms tend to mirror the essentialist construct. A majority of the articles stressed the fact that the current testing culture has corrupted accountability and had a detrimental effect on public education today. Thus, the increase in importance of state mandated assessments has occurred seemingly at a disregard for students' ability to become critical thinkers and limit, their ability to analyze historical documents as this requires high-order thinking skills. This action research study will attempt to find what impact a more constructivist classroom will have on the students' achievement.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will describe the process the action research will undergo. In an action research study a problem is presented and addressed, and then addressed again, it is an ongoing process (Mertler, 2014). Constructivism, at its core, is an instructional approach to student centered learning where the student has the ability to choose the direction of the assignment and thus make connections based on experience and collaboration. There is not any one specific set of guidelines for the students to follow as long as the final project demonstrates that meaningful learning has occurred.

The constructivist approach assumes that students use already acquired knowledge and experiences to construct meaningful representations of new knowledge. Thus, each learner may use different perspectives in creation of such knowledge. This newly acquired knowledge, once embedded and synthesized, will become prior acquired knowledge whereby new information can be further processed (Stahl, 1995). There is seemingly no end to the learning as knowledge builds upon itself.

The constructivist theory is not one single theory or monolithic set of beliefs, but rather generalized ideas of varying viewpoints that help guide educators to a more effective way of teaching (Stahl, 1995). Specifically, the social studies present a special situation whereby students must develop their own meaningful understanding of

democratic ideals. If real change is going to occur, then students must fully understand and apply their knowledge.

The collaboration produced through this action research design will allow all students in the group to work with each other, so they can increase both their knowledge and use each other as a resource to comprehend the challenging text of historical documents.

The goal of this action research study is to increase student engagement by motivating learners in an activity that fosters deeper levels of thinking and understanding. This increased engagement will ideally translate into not only higher EOC scores, but more attentive students. This action research study will include small group activities, student-directed learning, authentic assessments, and specific content vocabulary. After each class, an exit ticket will be completed by the students asking them to self-assess their level of engagement. Also, the teacher-researcher will complete a self-evaluation. The reflections and suggestions for further study will be included in Chapter Five.

Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this action research study is to present the findings of a mixed methods research case study documenting the challenges encountered when shifting from a teacher-led classroom to a constructivist environment. The ultimate goal is to determine the effectiveness of such a shift and solutions to problems associated with attempting the shift student-led classroom. This student-centered approach utilizes and encourages an analysis of primary and secondary historical documents to provide a deeper understanding of social studies content.

Problem of Practice

The below grade-level reading comprehension and lack of engagement of the US History students at West Hills High School has led to low standardized test scores. On standardized tests, the students are able to answer lower level questions that simply require recitation of facts. They struggle, however, when higher level questions require them to reason or make judgements by dissecting historical documents. The students' low reading ability also does not allow them to perform well on standardized tests which requires critical thinking and inferring meaning from documents. Furthermore, many students struggle with synthesizing knowledge in order to generate new understandings and expressions of those understandings. By creating a student-centered, constructivist classroom where students learn to effectively analyze historical documents, the teacher-researcher will attempt to increase critical understandings of the content. This will be shown through a deeper understanding of content vocabulary, increased critical analysis of historical documents, and better performance on higher level questions.

Research Question

Historical literacy and the ability to analyze historical artifacts (primary and secondary sources, maps, charts, pictures, political cartoons, etc.) are intertwined. The effects of literacy and critical analysis are necessary to promote civic engagement and awaken a social consciousness (Marshall & Klein, 2009). Moreover, the lack of engagement in social studies classrooms has led to an absence of student-centered instruction (Chiodo and Byford, 2004). The pressure of high-stakes standardized testing has led teachers to design lessons based on regurgitation of facts and resulted in more teacher-centered classrooms (Faulkner, & Cook, 2006; Vogler, & Virtue, 2007). This

teacher-centered instruction has steered classrooms away from more engaging activities and authentic assessments where the students are the focal point. US History teachers have seen how the high stakes testing movement has created classrooms where instruction has become mainly lecture oriented with little input from the students. It is clear that the lacking the development of critical thinking skills is harming the students when it comes to them developing a deeper understanding. This action research study will attempt to discover if US History students develop critical thinking skills through the inclusion of constructivist teaching methods which should lead to students being able to more effectively answer higher level questions, increase their content vocabulary, and improve their reading comprehension.

RQ: What would be the challenges in changing my teaching methods from an essentialist approach toward a more reformed teaching practice by focusing on developing inquiry and problems solving skills following a constructivist philosophy – a pedagogical shift in teaching?

Action Research Design

This action research study will attempt to determine the challenges of implementing a constructivist teaching methodology on high school US History students. The study consists of a mixed methods case study design incorporating narratives from the teacher and through student's input, which will be further explained in "Study Design".

As Mertler (2014) details, the action research study consists of a cycle where the research comprises four stages: *planning, acting, developing,* and *reflecting*. In the *planning* stage the researcher will identify a problem to investigate. The problem must be

manageable and narrow in order to be completed by the teacher-researcher, as some problems might become too convoluted and lengthy. The reason behind the action research study is to help address a classroom problem in which students benefit from the conclusions, therefore it must be completed within a short time period.

Once a topic or problem has been identified, the teacher-researcher gathers information from other educators in order to fully understand the problem at hand. After involving other educators, the teacher-researcher will need to read what other research has been done relating to the topic. This review of related literature is crucial as a teacher may find that others have already done the research and addressed the problem. The literature review could also help with narrowing the topic in order to provide a more focused approach. Finally, after the teacher-researcher has researched the topic and narrowed the problem, a research plan will be developed.

The second stage of the action research plan is *acting*. In this stage the teacher-researcher will implement the plan and collect all relevant data. Data such as questionnaires, surveys, test scores, field notes and observations will be used. Also, in this action research study a pretest-posttest will be given, and relevant data will come from those. After the data has been collected, the teacher-researcher will analyze the data to look for trends, patterns, themes, and/or categories. This current study is mixed methods in nature and through the use of qualitative teacher observations and student feedback as well as quantitative data from the pretest-posttest and teacher self-evaluations will determine whether the research plan was effective.

In the third stage, *developing*, the teacher-researcher will take the interpreted data and develop an appropriate plan based on the what the data shows. Due to the cyclical

nature of the action research study, the plan "must be continually monitored, evaluated, and revised" (Mertler, 2014, p. 43). This study contains a pre-evaluative phase with an additional two phases, and through each iteration arising challenges were addressed to attempt to perfect the model.

Finally, the *reflecting* stage of the action research plan involves sharing the results of the study with other stakeholders. The results can be shared either informally or formally. As Mertler (2014) states, the informal reflections simply act as a way for teachers to experiment with different treatments and refine them in order to optimize the outcomes. These informal outcomes will be shared within the local education community. The teacher-researcher may choose to formally present the findings by adding a research component where the teacher will present the findings in a paper or presentation. Thus, the formal action plan will be written in a scholarly manner to add credibility, yet the informal plan can be just as useful to the classroom teacher.

Ethical Considerations

Mertler (2014) explains several principles to which the teacher-researcher should uphold. First is the accurate disclosure which will explain any and all activities involved in the study. A letter of consent will be provided to all students over the age of 18. Any student under 18 years of age will receive a parental consent form. In addition, these minor students will be asked to give their assent to the study and sign a form that explains the nature of the research study.

Each student will be granted confidentiality and anonymity. This study calls for analysis and comparison of aggregate data. However, it may be necessary to report specific student works and include samples, or to report the findings in surveys. In all of

these instances, student names will be changed to ensure privacy. The rights of the participants and the participants themselves need to be protected (Mertler, 2014).

Furthermore, as Mertler (2014) describes there are other issues to consider. The research will be conducted in order to show a benefit – or a way to help – future students. The action researcher must be honest in the way the study is conducted and the data that is gathered. All relevant data will be reported to reflect the true nature of the study. Finally, Mertler discusses the necessity for the research "to contribute to human knowledge or be useful elsewhere in the field of education" (2014, p. 112). After the study has concluded, the data and will be shared with the students and other teachers at the research site in order to reflect on key findings.

Participant Observer

In this action research study, the teacher-researcher will act as a full participant in the process. The teacher-researcher will be an active participant conducting the study. To this end, the teacher-researcher will adhere to the fidelity of the study's stated purpose, and not influence the data or results. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2004) the teacher-researcher will address this "by carefully documenting, reading through and reflecting upon observations, drawing on multiple sources of data and discussing the ongoing project and preliminary findings with other teachers and teacher researchers" (p. 225). Thus, the teacher-researcher must continually reflect upon the study to uphold ethical commitment to the study.

District/School Policies

Specifically, regarding research studies conducted within West County Schools (pseudonym), all participants will be protected under Family Educational Rights and

Privacy Act (FERPA) guidelines, and through pre-approval of the action research study by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once approval from the IRB has been granted, the action research proposal will be submitted for approval form district personnel, including the school's principal. The district requires that the study be conducted with ethical responsibility, confidentiality, and the commitment that any research contributes to student growth and improvement in teaching (West County School District, 2012).

Study Design

The present action research study follows a mixed methods case study paradigm to compare possible gains in content knowledge between a pre- and post-assessment, as well as to determine if students are more engaged by participating in classroom activities. The qualitative data comes from multiple sources of data to arrive at conclusions. These include observations, questionnaires, formative assessments, interviews, and teacher self-evaluations. The teacher also kept a daily journal that documented the challenges inherent in changing teaching pedagogies. The quantitative data originates from a pretest-posttest and teacher self-evaluations.

The mixed methods approach was deemed most effective for this study due the nature of the case study. Through student input taken from exit ticket surveys and informal observation of students in engaged in classroom activities the teacher is able to plan and adjust lessons to fit the needs of the students. Further, the teacher will use daily self-evaluations to determine whether instruction is using constructivist methods. Additionally, quantitative data will be taken from these self-evaluations and from a pretest-posttest used to determine how much student attainment is achieved. This study is

being conducted in a US History class where all students will be given a state mandated EOC. Content knowledge is essential for students to perform well.

Specifically, the teacher will be enacting instructional strategies that reflect a constructivist understanding of how people learn. The students engaged in a series of activities design to increase engagement and attainment of content knowledge. Through the series of activities, the student feedback and teacher observations will then lead to slight changes in classroom assignments.

The teacher will use evaluations designed by Sawada, Piburn, Turley, Falconer, Benford, Bloom, and Judson (2000) in the Reformed Teaching Observation Protocol (RTOP) training guidebook. The RTOP gives guidelines to determine the degree to which a teacher is "reformed". In other words, what is level of student-led constructivist teaching occurring in the classroom.

The RTOP was designed to be specifically used in the sciences as it measures, among other things, conceptual understandings, the use of abstract models, and student predictions. These have been adapted toward a social studies class with students using their content knowledge to answer higher order questions and answer abstract questions related to historical events and people.

At the outset I used the Reformed Teaching Observation Protocol (RTOP) evaluation as a way to gather baseline data of instruction through teacher-centered essentialist methodology. The RTOP Training Guide explicitly states that it "was designed to be used by trained observers" (Sawada et al., 2000, p. 1). This teacher-researcher and the support teachers are not trained observers but rather used the RTOP as a guide to develop an inquiry-based constructivist classroom. Both the RTOP training

guide and RTOP reference manual are seemingly easy to follow and give explanations for how items should be scored. As the implementation of reformed teaching practices continued, the teacher-researcher became more adept at scoring himself and adjusted the lessons to coincide with areas of improvement.

Implementation Design

The implementation of the four action research cycles followed the Mertler's (2014) model: planning, acting, developing, and reflecting.

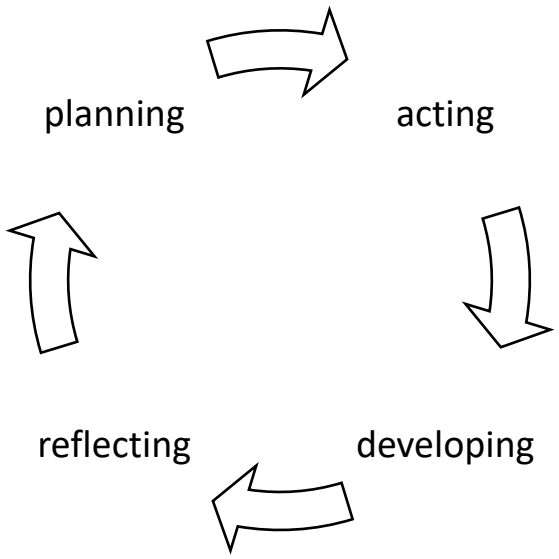


Figure 3.1. Action Research Cycle (Mertler, 2014)

Pre-Cycle Phase

Specifically, before the trials the teacher-researcher analyzed two-days of lessons to determine the amount of inquiry-based learning, or rather lack thereof. After working through the RTOP and noting areas of weakness, I interviewed three students (not chosen randomly) to get a baseline of their own feelings of engagements in the classroom. They represented three reading levels (high, medium, low). I chose AP, who is a college bound

African American female, SE who is an African American female who will probably attend a 4-year college, and JF who is an African American male that has challenges in reading comprehension, and an IEP due to an intellectual disability that hinders his reading ability.

All three students were interviewed together in a focus group. At the beginning of this brief interview, I explained that the questions were meant to inform me and that by being honest is the best way to help me become a better teacher. I asked them about their general impressions of my class, what they liked/disliked, their level of engagement and boredom. Finally, I asked them what they believed could get the class more engaged.

Phase One

During a multi-week period, the classes were taught content-based standards, specifically the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam and its relationship to the 1960's and 1970's. The class will be given a multiple-choice pre-test and free response essay to set their baseline understanding of the material. The action research plan will provide a way for the teacher to motivate the learner and create more student-centered activities. The teacher wishes to reach deeper understandings and construction of knowledge. The objective of this study comprises both analysis and synthesis of historical documents through the completion of an authentic assessment. The classes in which the model will be implemented were taught based on the constructivist teaching theory. Lesson plans are included in Appendix B.

At the end of every class, an RTOP evaluation was administered to determine the degree to which the teacher used the reformed teaching methods. These scores will drive changes to daily lessons. In addition to the RTOP evaluations, each student will be given

an exit ticket. These exit tickets will ask the students to rate their own level of engagement and enjoyment of the lesson on a Likert scale. Furthermore, the students were told that they could state what they learned and needed help with the following day. These exit tickets were analyzed each night in order to inform the teacher on any content related issues. See Figure 3.4.

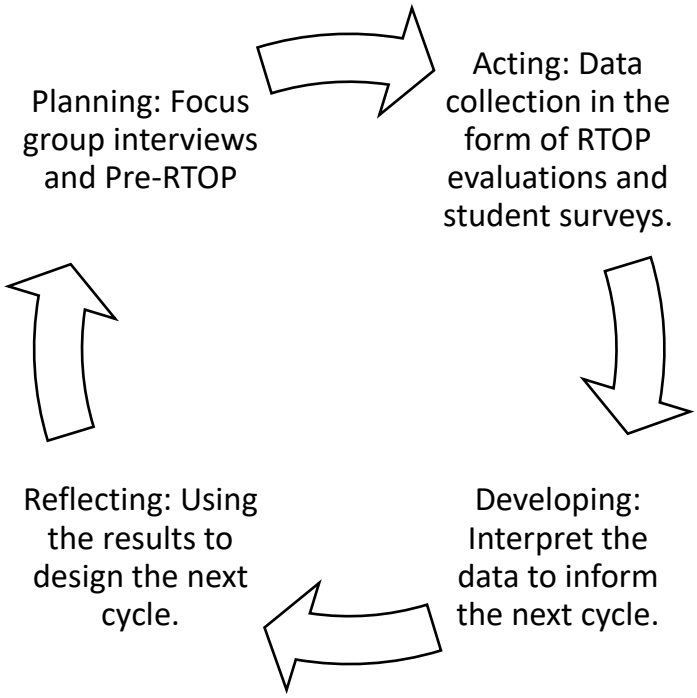


Figure 3.2. Phase one of action research design.

Phase Two

A second cycle was designed based on the outcomes from the first phase. Refinement and changes to the activities will attempt to elicit more student-led behaviors. Phase two generally followed the same course as phase one, with the exception that the exit ticket questions were altered as to elicit more student responses. Additionally, with

phase two, the teacher-researcher began with a better understanding of the RTOP practices and thus was more attuned to addressing each fact of the observation.

The first lesson during phase two attempted to get the students to interact using academic language. The assignment called for the students to complete a Vietnam Frayer model and jigsaw vocabulary activity. In the jigsaw lesson each group was required to become an expert in a term or phrase assigned. They then rotated to other groups to teach that term to their classmates. Each pair was allowed to choose to identify any term related to the Vietnam war. They completed a Frayer Model vocabulary sheet (Frayer, Frederick, & Klausmeier, 1969; Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2014). I then assigned each group a specific word. The students were to define the term, use it in a sentence, illustrate the term, and describe it in their own words. In effect they were becoming experts of this term, in order to build upon their prior knowledge.

The second and third days of phase two had the students work on a DBQ lesson. I started the class by handing out the documents and gave them three steps: read through all the documents and make notes on anything they would chose, find themes linking the documents, and finally classify or categorize the documents into 3-4 categories. At the end of the time period we discussed the possible themes and broke them into many categories. The teacher guided students toward a thematic approach and wrote all of their categories on the board. Then the teacher wrote “social, political, economic, or military” on the board and the class put all of their ideas into one of those categories.

The groups went back to the documents and classified each one using the “social, political, economic, or military” themes, then completed a series of questions that would help prompt them to get the main ideas from each document. The goal of the assignment

was to develop a strong thesis statement that discusses the impact of the Vietnam War on American Society. This goal was not solely comprehension of content but rather to allow the students to interact and problem solve on their own.

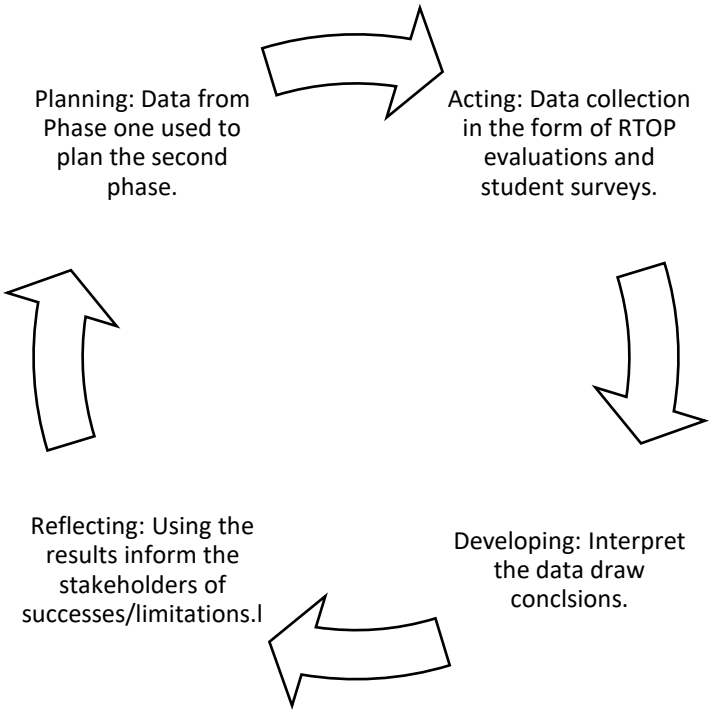


Figure 3.3. Phase two of action research design.

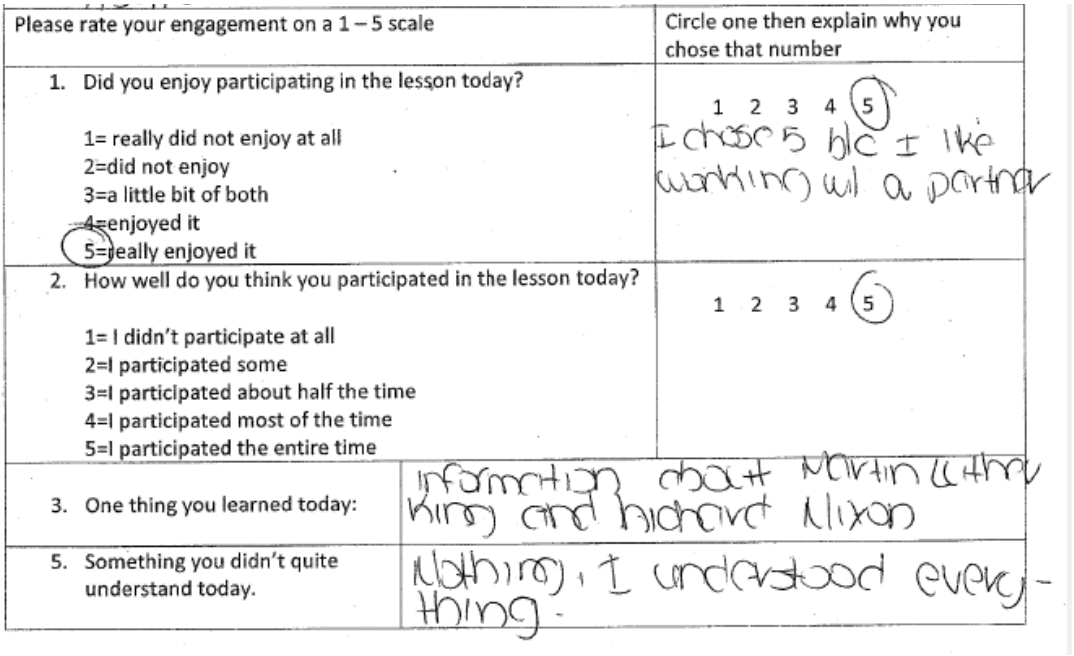
Data Analysis and Instruments

In this action research study data was collected and analyzed then used to inform and revise the study itself. The research question addresses the challenges of implementing a classroom based on the constructivist pedagogy. This was due to the students lack engagement.

Each day an exit ticket was completed by the students. These were useful because it gave each student a voice that expressed their level of interaction and engagement with the class each day. The engagement levels were coded as E-High for high levels of

engagement, E-Med for medium levels of engagement, and E-Low for students marking low levels of engagement. There were also areas for the students to express any thoughts and certain key themes emerged and were noted. Student comments were coded using: group work, peer-to-peer learning, active learning, student-student dialogues, and teaching others. These categories were useful as they directly support RTOP guidelines.

The students were given exit tickets in the form of a survey. These were to determine the student's self-reflection on their level of participation and engagement as well as to give them the opportunity to tell the teacher what they learned and what they may not have understood about the day's lesson.



Please rate your engagement on a 1 – 5 scale	Circle one then explain why you chose that number
1. Did you enjoy participating in the lesson today? 1= really did not enjoy at all 2=did not enjoy 3=a little bit of both 4=enjoyed it 5=really enjoyed it	1 2 3 4 (5) I chose 5 b/c I like working w/ a partner
2. How well do you think you participated in the lesson today? 1= I didn't participate at all 2=I participated some 3=I participated about half the time 4=I participated most of the time 5=I participated the entire time	1 2 3 4 (5)
3. One thing you learned today:	information about Martin Luther King and Richard Nixon
5. Something you didn't quite understand today.	Nothing, I understood everything.

Figure 3.4. Phase One, Day One student exit ticket

These student exit tickets were given to the students at the end of each class during the first phase. However, even though the information given by the students

showed their engagement levels were generally high, it was difficult to elicit specifics about what was most effective. The teacher altered the exit tickets to add a section about how much the students interacted with their classmates as that was an area that needed additional support in the first phase. The phase two exit ticket added additional items.

Participants

The teacher in this action research study will act the researcher, and therefore will lead instruction in the US History classes during the spring of 2018. The students will act as the participants. According to the South Carolina Department of Education school report card (2015) the school, WHHS (pseudonym) has an enrollment of 530 students, in the northern rural part of Beaufort County, South Carolina, with a poverty index rating of 77. The teacher-researcher's student population is comprised of 115 students, with 55% of students being male, while 77% are African Americans, 14% are white, and 9% are Hispanic. There is not a large population of English as a second language, however 10% are classified with learning disabilities (LD.). Moreover, the school struggles overall with a lack of reading comprehension and general literacy. The school is consistently at the bottom in comparison to other schools within the district. The goal of this action research project is to study the challenges of switching teaching pedagogies on a student population, where a large number of students are low level readers. This was accomplished by devising lessons that focus on specific reading comprehension and vocabulary activities and taught through the constructivist methodology.

The target audience is a 11th grade US History class, with 18 students. There are 3 students who receive special educations services, while 89 percent of students are African-American and 11 percent white. Overall the class is comprised of students with

below grade level reading abilities as documented through Lexile scores. The average Lexile scores for the class is 650 with students ranging from 400-1200. If the students were on-grade level the Lexile ranges would be 1130 – 1440. This means that all, with the exception of one, of the students in the class are below grade level, with many far below.

Summary and Conclusion

In this action research study, the students are presented lessons through the constructivist ideology. This should afford the students a deeper understanding of the objectives. Through the constructivist approach, the students are allowed to take ownership and have autonomy to use previously held knowledge to *construct* new knowledge. The development of an action research plan was completed in order to appropriately serve the students. The students' ability to synthesize historical artifacts will be reflected upon to determine which course of action is needed for further study.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Topic and Background

This chapter will present the data collected and explain the findings of this study of the research question: what are the challenges associated with changing teaching methods from an essentialist approach toward a more reformed teaching practice by focusing on developing inquiry and problems solving skills following a constructivist philosophy? Data collected represents the results of two phases of implementation where I used the framework from the RTOP evaluation to reform my teaching methodology.

The study followed a mixed methods narrative case-study design which shows challenges inherent to switching pedagogies (Creswell, 2007). As with a mixed methods approach, I will use the results of self-evaluative observations, and student observations in the form of exit tickets. The qualitative case study used coding to determine any common themes with the feedback elicited by the students. Quantitative data is derived from a pretest-posttest and the ratings from the RTOP.

The data collected by the RTOP follows a typical Likert scale from 0 to 4. The 0 represents that the corresponding item never appeared in the lesson. A score of 1 would be given if the item appeared at least once. A score of 2, 3, or 4 would appear depending on the degree to which that item appeared. For instance, a score of 4 would be given if

the item in question is very descriptive and represented in the lesson. Each category of the RTOP was broken down and scored, then averaged.

The findings will be broken down by section of the RTOP. First, I will present the data from the RTOP and then the exit tickets will be analyzed for any emergent themes. After the first phase the results will be explained, leading to the development of the second trial.

Findings

Pre-RTOP

In order to get a baseline, the teacher-researcher self-reported results from the RTOP, as well as interviewed three students to get a sense of how they thought the class was organized. The preliminary interviews asked a few simple questions of three students. These three students were not chosen randomly as the attempt was made to get a range of academic abilities.

The students represented three reading levels (high, medium, low). The teacher-researcher chose them as he wanted a spectrum of achievers (A.P., who is a college bound African American female, S.E. is an African American female who will likely attend a 4-year college, and J.F., an African American male that has challenges in reading comprehension. All three students were present, and the interview took the form of a focus group.

Interviewer:	What are your current impressions of the class?
AP:	I like lectures because I like to hear facts directly from my teachers. Sometimes it may not be helpful because we cannot share our thoughts with our classmates. I am interested in the subject and would like to discuss the topics with my classmates.

SE: I like it too, because the teacher knows a lot about history and he tells us what notes are important.

JF: I think so too, but sometimes the lectures move too fast and go on for too long.

Interviewer: On an average day what are some things that you like about my class?

AP: The teacher is entertaining and makes the subject fun.

SE: I agree.

JF: Yeah. It's a fun class the way the teacher jokes with the students.

Interviewer: What are the things in class that you dislike?

AP: Some of the assignments are the same. We learn the same things several different times, the lectures, the summaries, the assignments.

SE: The class can get boring when the teacher talks too much.

JF: It feels really long.

Interviewer: On a daily basis how engaged are you in the class? What is your level of boredom?

AP: I am pretty much engaged the whole class, I am not bored really but I can do other work while the teacher lectures and still keep up.

SE: I do my work and answer questions, so I think I am engaged.

JF: I pay attention to the lectures and sometimes I get tired, but I don't think I am bored.

Interviewer: What would make you more engaged in the class?

AP: I like it the way it is, but if I have to choose something I think projects might be fun.

SE: Projects or things where we can talk and listen to music while we work.

JF: Listening to music and working with others.

The pre-RTOP student interviews showed that breaking away from teacher-led instruction was something the students desired. Through the interview it was implied that students are used to being in classes where the teacher directed activities and discussions.

During the preliminary baseline RTOP, the teacher-researcher self-evaluated two separate days of class instruction to get a control level and see which areas could be improved. The table below describes the RTOP criteria for each section.

Table 4.1. Reformed Teaching Observation Protocol (RTOP)

LESSON DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION	Scale
1. The instructional strategies and activities respected students' prior knowledge and the preconceptions inherent therein.	0 1 2 3 4
2. The lesson was designed to engage students as members of a learning community.	0 1 2 3 4
3. In this lesson, student exploration preceded formal presentation.	0 1 2 3 4
4. This lesson encouraged students to seek and value alternative modes of investigation or of problem solving.	0 1 2 3 4
5. The focus and direction of the lesson was often determined by ideas originating with students.	0 1 2 3 4
CONTENT	
Propositional Knowledge	
6. The lesson involved fundamental concepts of the subject.	0 1 2 3 4
7. The lesson promoted strongly coherent conceptual understanding.	0 1 2 3 4
8. The teacher had a solid grasp of the subject matter content inherent in the lesson.	0 1 2 3 4
9. Elements of abstraction (i.e., symbolic representations, theory building) were encouraged when it was important to do so.	0 1 2 3 4
10. Connections with other content disciplines and/or real world phenomena were explored and valued.	0 1 2 3 4
Procedural Knowledge	
11. Students used a variety of means (models, drawings, graphs, concrete materials, manipulatives, etc.) to represent phenomena.	0 1 2 3 4
12. Students made predictions, estimations and/or hypotheses and devised means for testing them.	0 1 2 3 4
13. Students were actively engaged in thought-provoking activity that often involved the critical assessment of procedures.	0 1 2 3 4
14. Students were reflective about their learning.	0 1 2 3 4
15. Intellectual rigor, constructive criticism, and the challenging of ideas were valued.	0 1 2 3 4
CLASSROOM CULTURE	
Communicative Interactions	
16. Students were involved in the communication of their ideas to others using a variety of means and media.	0 1 2 3 4
17. The teacher's questions triggered divergent modes of thinking.	0 1 2 3 4

18. There was a high proportion of student talk and a significant amount of it occurred between and among students.	0 1 2 3 4
19. Student questions and comments often determined the focus and direction of classroom discourse.	0 1 2 3 4
20. There was a climate of respect for what others had to say.	0 1 2 3 4
Student Teacher Relationships	
21. Active participation of students was encouraged and valued.	0 1 2 3 4
22. Students were encouraged to generate conjectures, alternative solution strategies, and ways of interpreting evidence.	0 1 2 3 4
23. In general, the teacher was patient with students.	0 1 2 3 4
24. The teacher acted as a resource person, working to support and enhance student investigations.	0 1 2 3 4
25. The metaphor "teacher as listener" was very characteristic of this classroom.	0 1 2 3 4

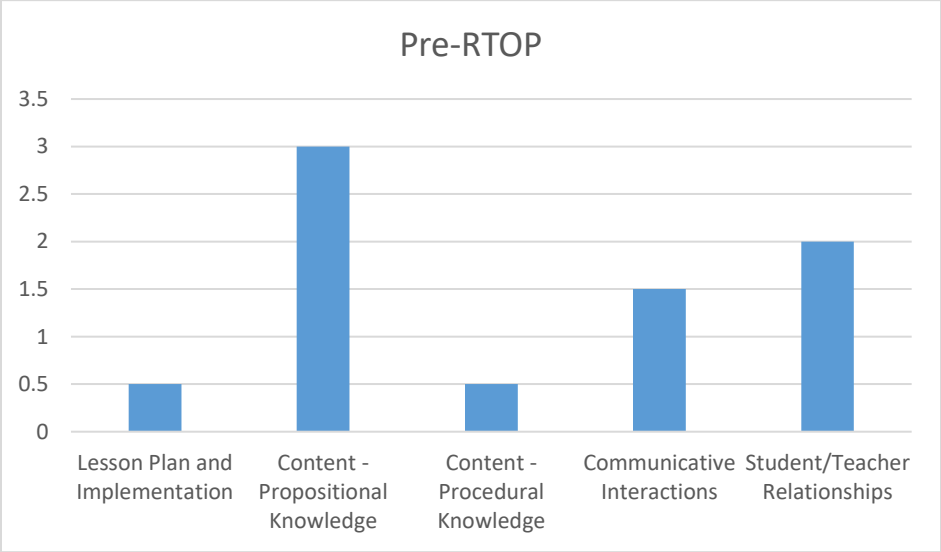


Figure 4.1 Pre-RTOP Scores

Not surprisingly the results showed that there was a lack of engagement and inquiry presented in the typical teacher-led classroom. Looking at the Pre-RTOP results, the Lesson Plan and Implementation and Procedural Content Knowledge items were virtually non-existent. The Lesson Plan and Implementation determines whether prior knowledge is adequately accessed and whether the students are engaged in a lesson that they themselves determine. The teacher-centered lesson does not typically provide

opportunities for student derived lessons. Moreover, the Procedural Content items include activities where the students test models they develop and engage in activities that lead to inquiry where the students are challenged in rigorous intellectual learning. The other areas of the RTOP were low and not a focus of the lesson, apart from Content Knowledge items. The Content Knowledge section focuses on whether the teacher is knowledgeable of the content and in a content rich and standards-based classroom this should be apparent.

After conferring with students and analyzing the deficiencies in the pre-RTOP, the lessons for phase one were written. The activities for phase two were devised based on input from both students and the RTOP guide as well as results from phase one..

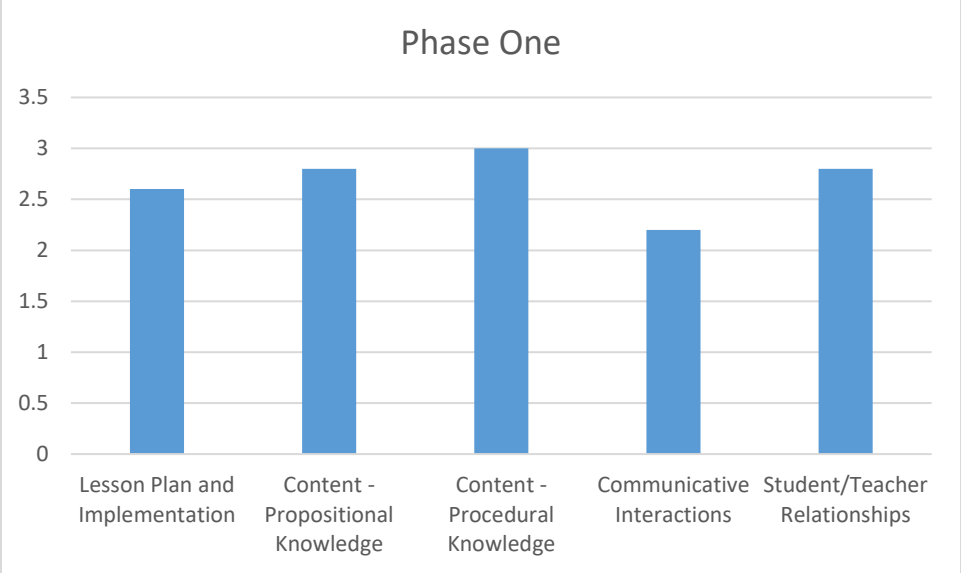


Figure 4.2 Phase one daily average of evaluative RTOP

With the implementation of phase one, the lessons appear more student-centered. Two areas where improvement occurred were in the Lesson Plan and Implementation and

Procedural Knowledge. This was due to specific items in the daily lessons that were intended to use the student's own ideas and prior knowledge to drive instruction. This was purposely designed to have the students activate their prior knowledge.

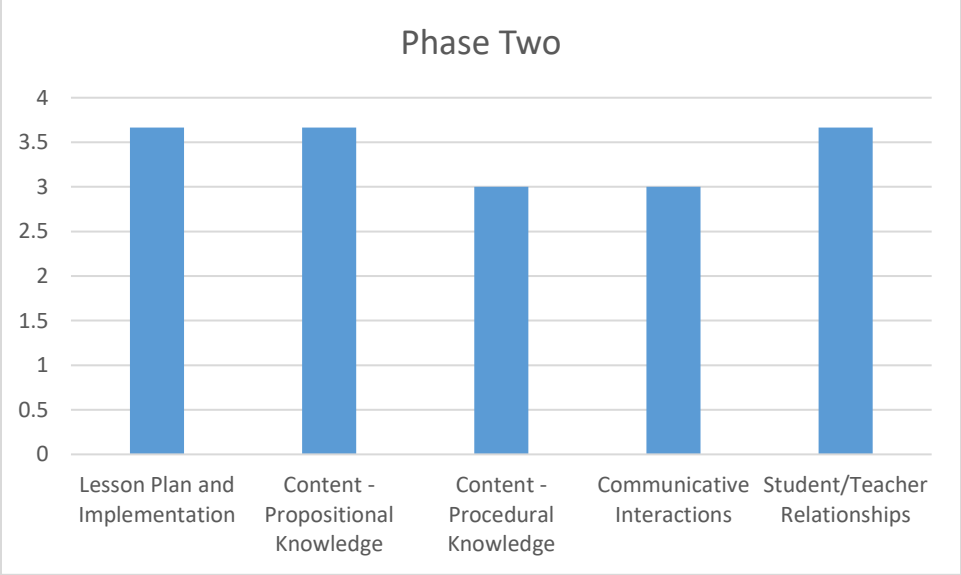


Figure 4.3 Phase two daily average of evaluative RTOP

Phase two shows improvement in all areas of the RTOP. The lessons designed for phase two were especially borne out of the results for the previous RTOP evaluations. Each day the lessons included aspects of inquiry and student interactions. Phase two's improvement was based on adjusting lessons to specifically target weaker areas. However, not all activities lent themselves to success on all RTOP sections.

Lesson Plan and Implementation

In this section we will examine the specifics of the Lesson Plan and Implementation items of the RTOP. Each phase will be broken down to discuss what was

learned. Phase one and phase two will be compared with overall scores, then phase one will be broken down to be analyzed followed separately by phase two.

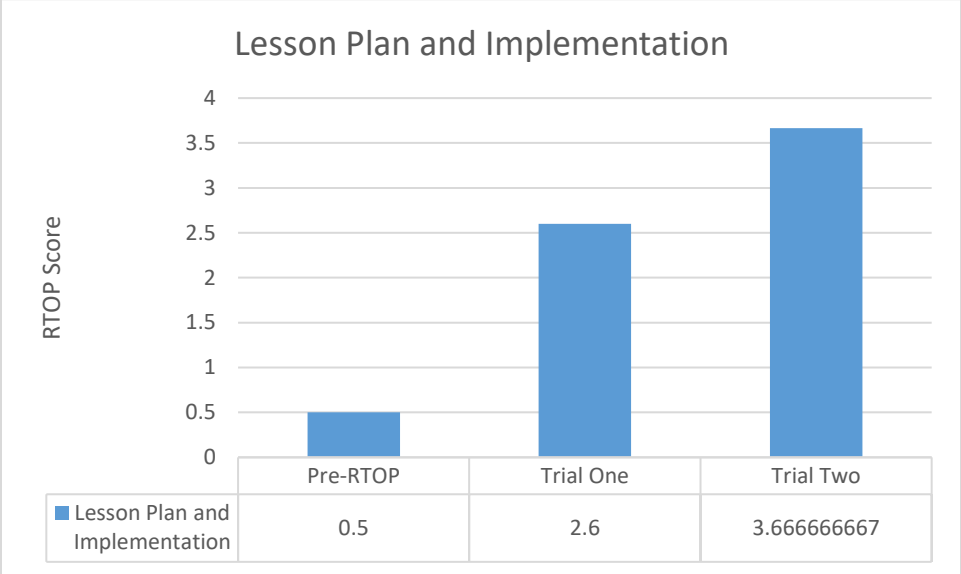


Figure 4.4 Lesson Plan and Implementation comparisons

In the Pre-RTOP lesson the involvement of the students and respect for the student's prior knowledge was not indicated. Accessing prior knowledge was present but the teacher did not value the student's insight inasmuch as directing the lesson toward the student's involvement. The student was the receiver rather than the initiator. In phase one, lessons were designed specifically to garner their input with regards to the direction of the lesson. In phase two, activities were designed to build up and scaffold prior knowledge.

Lesson Plan and Implementation Phase One

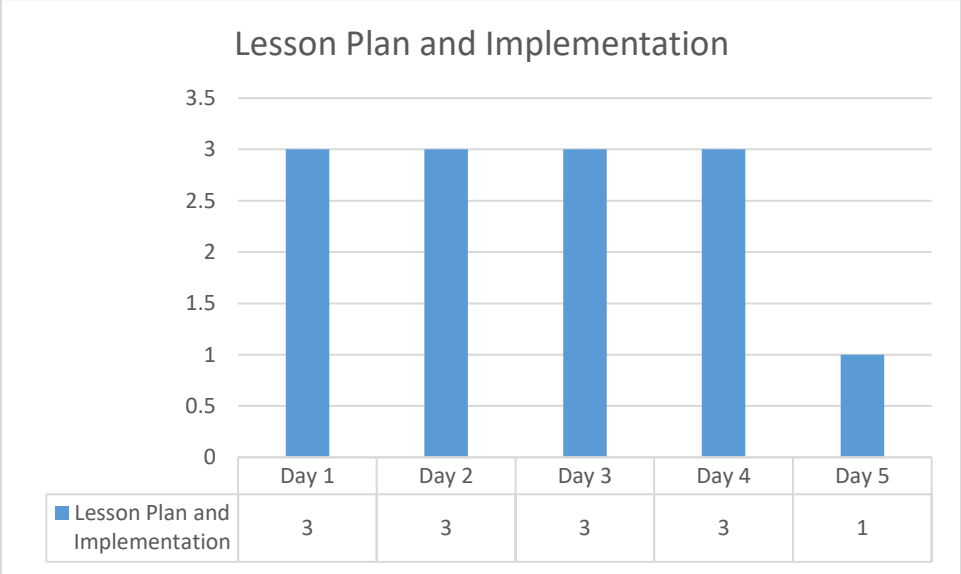


Figure 4.5 Lesson Plan and Implementation phase one daily scores.

During the first phase, I purposely sought out ways to include the students in the lessons and have the ideas and content originate with them. On Day 1, I introduced the lesson, handed out the student log, and wrote names of the 4 people on the board – Martin Luther King, Jr, Malcolm X, Lyndon Johnson (LBJ) and Richard Nixon. The students chose groups of three students with which to work. They were then allowed to research the person they chose however they liked. Many watched videos on the internet. I asked them to log what websites and videos with which they had visited and viewed.

On Day 2 the class began with the students getting into their groups and finalizing their previous day's activity. Next, I had every group choose two political/social issues that they are concerned with today. I had each group write them on the board. The class voted on their top three and we eliminated ones that were not seen as important. Once the

list was narrowed down, I had each group pick one topic and copy the persona of one the four historical figures. They were then to create an authentic assessment which included a speech, a letter to the editor, short essay explaining views, power point, photo story, video, or anything else they wanted.

On Day 3, the class opened with the teacher giving a quick timeline of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Each group was given a set of documents on MLK, Jr. and Malcom X. The students were to spend 10-15 minutes classifying the documents. The classification process forced the students to categorize the documents thematically. The class had trouble with coming up with categories. I had each group come up to the board and list their categories. Next the teacher brought the class back in for whole group instruction as we discussed and agreed on the classification. We then chose the best three. This is where the students were the most engaged. The students debated which categories were better and some took it personally when their ideas were not selected – as if they owned that idea. They broke back into our groups and did a final classification using the three main categories.

On Day 4, the students were redirected to consider at the question: whose philosophy made the most sense for the 1960's? The teacher led a brief discussion about civil disobedience, then the students broke back into their groups for a written answer to the question. This was probably the best activity of all as almost every student was well engaged and seemed to enjoy their learning. The students used their own prior knowledge and predicted what their historical figure would do and why.

Finally, on Day 5, the class began with the showing of three short videos (Woolworth Sit-in- 6 min., Freedom Riders – 5 min., MLK Jr. in Selma – 3 min.). I

showed one video then discussed it, then another, etc. The students seemed rather bored. Several students went to sleep. Each day in class (prior to this day) they were active and learning. When they sat and watched videos, however brief they were, they reverted to dis-engagement. The Day 5 RTOP illustrates that the lesson did not begin with the student's ideas in mind; they lacked interest. This was a day to summarize the learning and teach specific content objectives.

Propositional and Procedural Content Knowledge

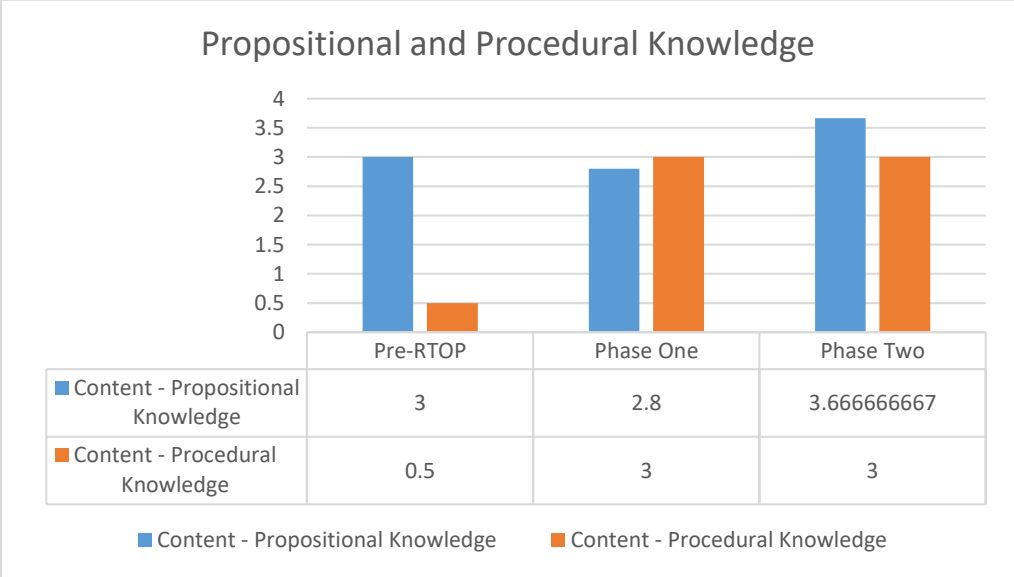


Figure 4.6 Propositional and Procedural Content Knowledge comparisons

The content section of the RTOP is broken into two parts: propositional knowledge and procedural knowledge. Since the RTOP is designed for math and science classes, not all the criteria correlates perfectly to the social studies classroom. The data presented in Figure 4.6 shows very little improvement in propositional knowledge, whereas procedural knowledge improved with throughout phase one and two.

Propositional and Procedural Content Phase One

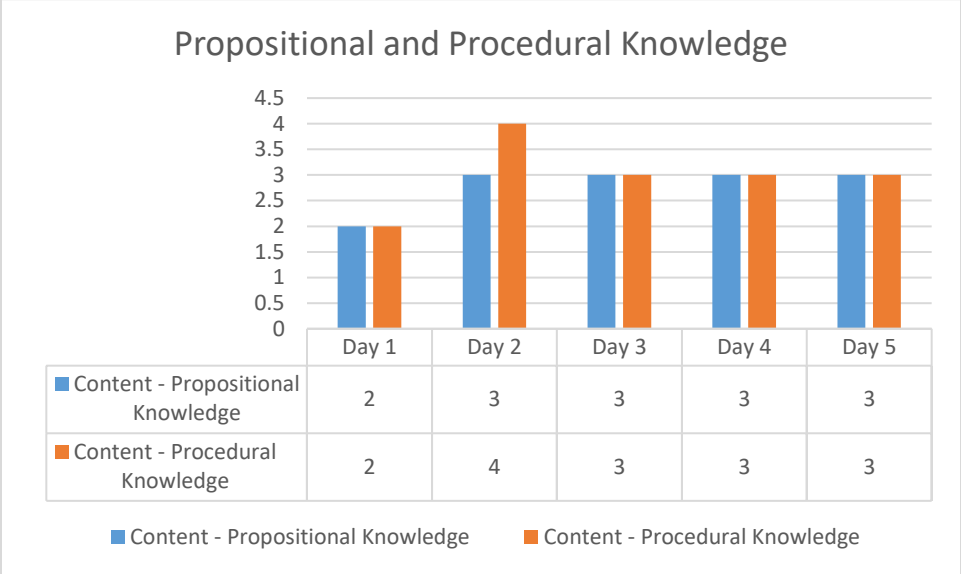


Figure 4.7 Propositional and Procedural Content phase one daily scores

Figure 4.7 shows that both Propositional and Procedural Content Knowledge items were scored rather low on Day 1, but rose once the students learned background information and were able to apply the knowledge gained to inquiry-based activities. Day 2 required them to create an authentic assessment and gave ownership of their topic to the student.

The content was presented with the students' interests in mind. The areas of student development of models and making predictions are where improvement was needed. It was my intention that through the questions proffered they would be able to make predictions of how their historical figure would respond to a contemporary problem. This did not happen.

Communicative Interactions

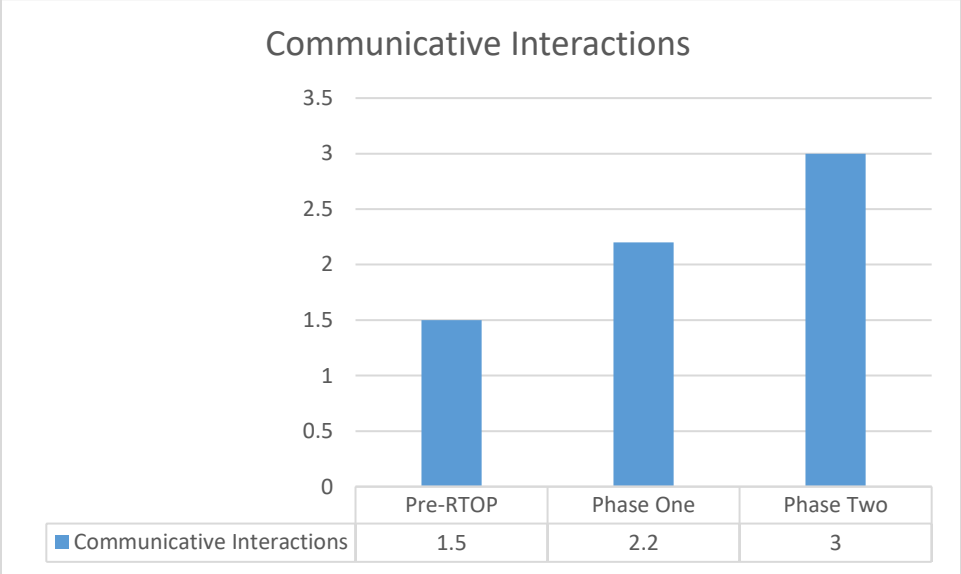


Figure 4.8 Communicative Interactions comparisons

In figure 4.8, communication between teachers and students and students to students increased over the action research period. It should be noted that this was one of the more challenging areas. The students had to be taught how to communicate with each other while using academic language.

Within peer groups, appropriate dialogue is necessary to properly accomplish the classroom goals. Communicative Interactions was an area that I thought would score higher. The lessons were created with group work interactions purposely embedded to elicit discussions among group members. However, one of the findings of phase one was the issue that students do not effectively interact within groups as shown in Figure 4.9.

Communicative Interactions Phase One

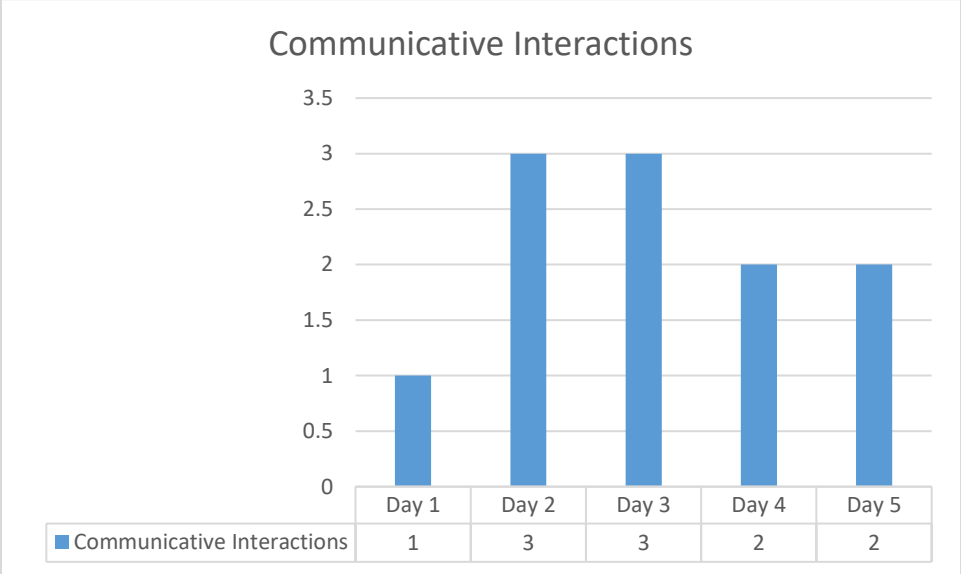


Figure 4.9 Communicative Interactions phase one daily scores.

On Day 1, after the students got into their groups it took a while – nine minutes – for the students to get settled and start working within their groups. It was very chaotic during this set-up time, but once they got started it quieted down. However, after they quieted down they actually became silent. There was virtually no interaction amongst the groups. Most groups were not working collaboratively. Therefore, at the end of 20 minutes I asked each group to confer with each other to make sure they had the similar facts and had viewed similar resources. I had to push them to communicate by continually prompting them.

The remainder of the week they were working together on their assessments and reading documents to each other. But I had to prompt them constantly to work together as a collaborative group, rather than individuals simply sitting next to each other. Peer-to-

peer dialogues were an obstacle. As part of the action research plan, I delved deeper into creating dialogues. Howe and Abedin (2013) systematically reviewed 225 research studies to determine the benefits of dialogue. Their analysis showed that properly designed dialogues increased achievement when competing ideas were expressed, justified and examined. The teacher, however, must be present to monitor the discussions. Before phase two, I developed a scaffolding method that pushes questions to facilitate exploratory dialogue.

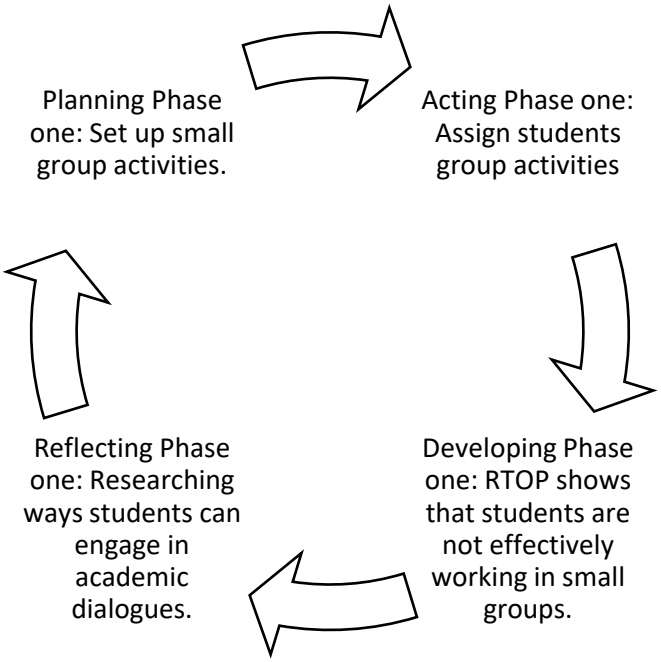


Figure 4.10 Action Research Phase One of Communicative Interactions

Communicative interactions exemplify an area where action research methodology facilitated positive results. During the planning cycle of phase one it was clear from the pre-RTOP score that student to student interactions were deficient. During phase one I assumed that by placing students in groups they would innately know how to communicate with each other. According to the phase one RTOP scores, even though they scored slightly higher, peer-to-peer interactions were still inadequate. With the phase

two cycle, specific steps were taken to first research then apply the research to the class by modeling correct academic dialogue.

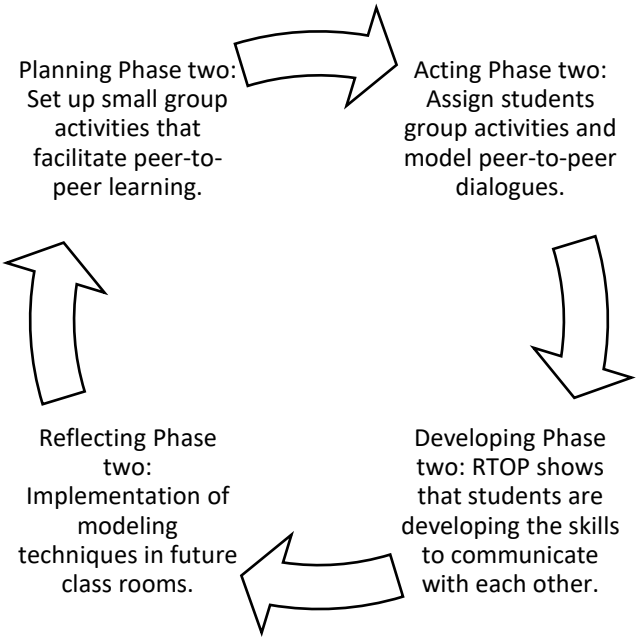


Figure 4.11 Action Research Phase Two of Communicative Interactions

Student/Teacher Relationships

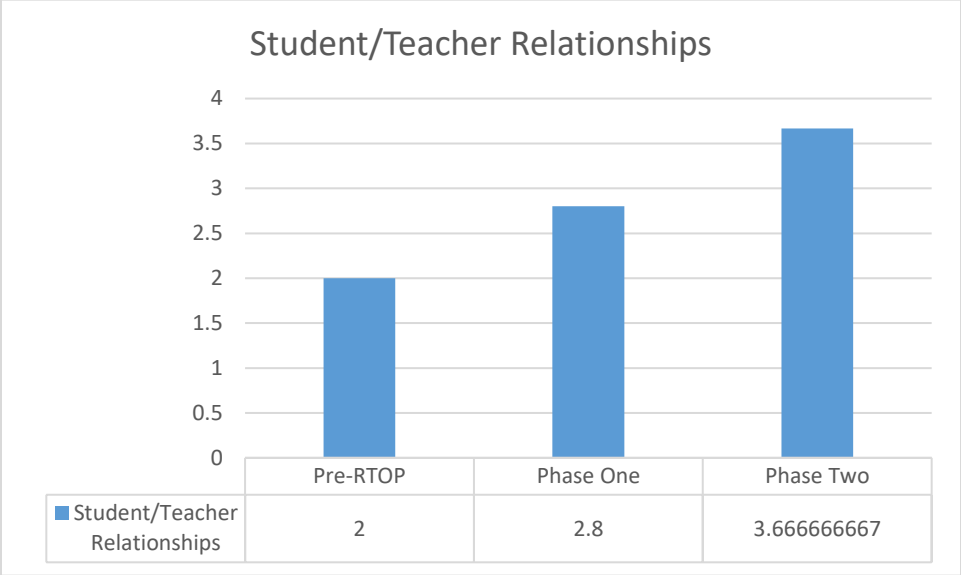


Figure 4.12 Student/Teacher Relationships comparisons

Figure 4.12 illustrates that student-teacher interactions improved over both phases. There was a concerted effort by the teacher to actively encourage students in speaking. Additionally, the teacher instituted a wait time between the questions asked to give the students more time to think before a student answered.

This area has specific challenges as well. Many students ask simple, fact-based questions that could have been answered if the student looked through the documents. It was hard for the teacher-researcher to not answer the questions directly. One student, NM, became visibly frustrated and questioned why I would not just tell her the answer as her group mates did not know it either. I tried to explain that I am there to help not to provide answers. NM displayed some dissatisfaction with this response, went back to her group and sat down.

Student/Teacher Relationships Phase One

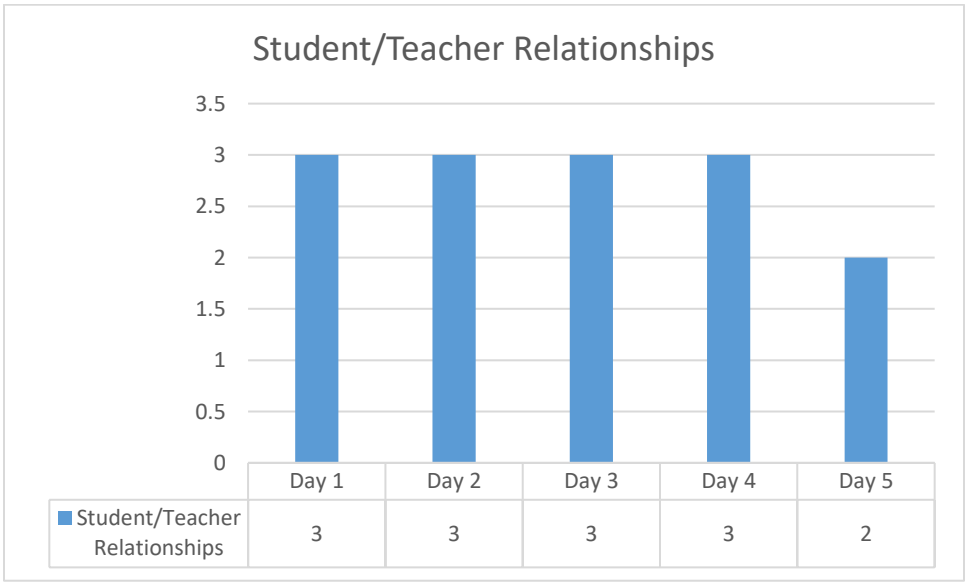


Figure 4.13 Student/Teacher Interactions phase one daily scores.

In Figure 4.13, phase one data shows that student/teacher interactions went well the first few days as I allowed the students to influence instruction and helped guide them toward the appropriate content areas. On Day 5, interactions were lowest since many students were not involved in the lesson and interacting in the class. Many were sleeping during instruction. The teacher also led instruction more this day rather than acting as a listener.

Lesson Plan and Implementation Phase Two

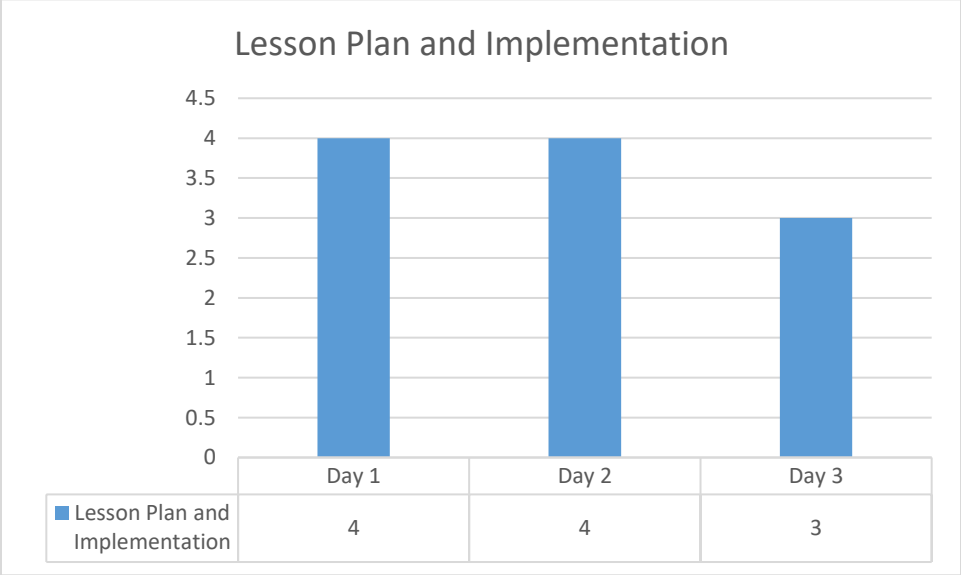


Figure 4.14 Lesson Plan and Implementation phase two

The development of the second phase purposely reflected the RTOP guidelines. The class began in a modified jigsaw lesson. I had the class break into pairs and assigned them a free will exercise where they could choose to identify any term related to the Vietnam war. They completed a Frayer Model vocabulary sheet. I then assigned each

partnership (group) a specific word. The students were to define the term, use it in a sentence, illustrate the term, and describe it in their own words. In effect they were becoming experts of this term. The lesson respected prior knowledge and began with the students' direction. Day two began with the students using their previous days knowledge of the content vocabulary to analyze a set of documents in a DBQ. As they analyzed, they were tasked with thinking thematically while developing categories for each document. Several students pointed out that certain vocabulary words they had become the experts on were embedded in the documents, which was a highlight of the activity. On Day three, the students were asked to develop a thesis. The students found this difficult and it required the teacher to help direct the instruction.

Propositional and Procedural Content Phase Two

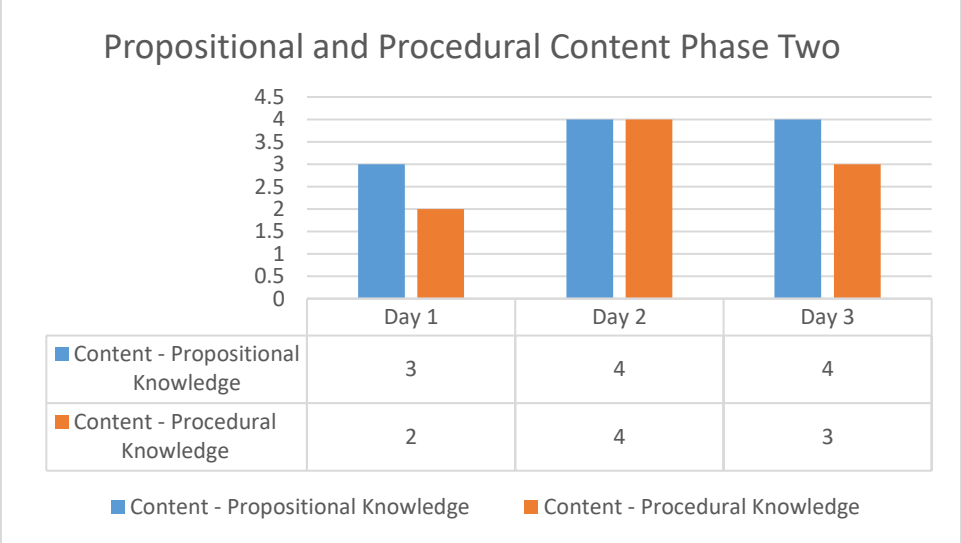


Figure 4.15 Propositional and Procedural Content phase two daily scores.

One of the main focuses during phase two was getting the students to develop critical thinking and inquiry skills. Day one of phase two was a basic vocabulary group

activity. Interactive as it was, the students were not pressed into any type of rigorous processes. Their skills were not challenged. On days two and three, the students were challenged and several students struggled, albeit productively, but struggled to reach those higher levels of thinking needed to make predictions and analyze documents.

Communicative Interactions Phase Two

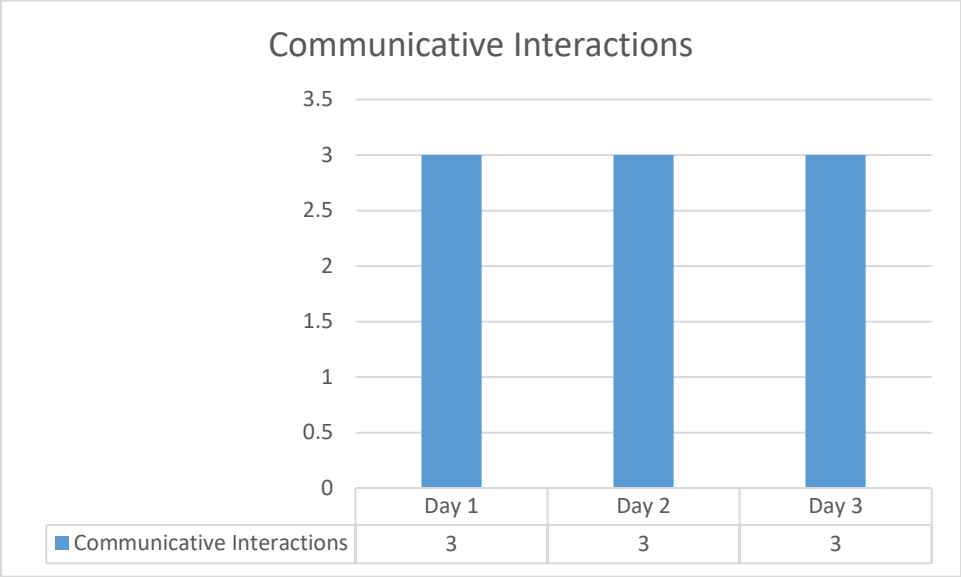


Figure 4.16 Communicative Interactions phase two daily scores.

Communication among students and with the teacher were a key issue coming out of phase one. I observed that most students did not know how to collaborate using academic language. Moreover, they did not seem to know how to work together. Rather one person would do the work and then share it with the others. They worked independently within a group rather working actively with the group. For the lessons in phase two, the students were given a specific set of dialogues that they used to

communicate with each other. On day one, when they shared the vocabulary during the jigsaw activity they each followed a specified script that prompted them to interact and use the proper language. This carried into days two and three. After the first day, I allowed them to naturally alter the dialogue, so they could use their own words.

Student/Teacher Relationships Phase Two

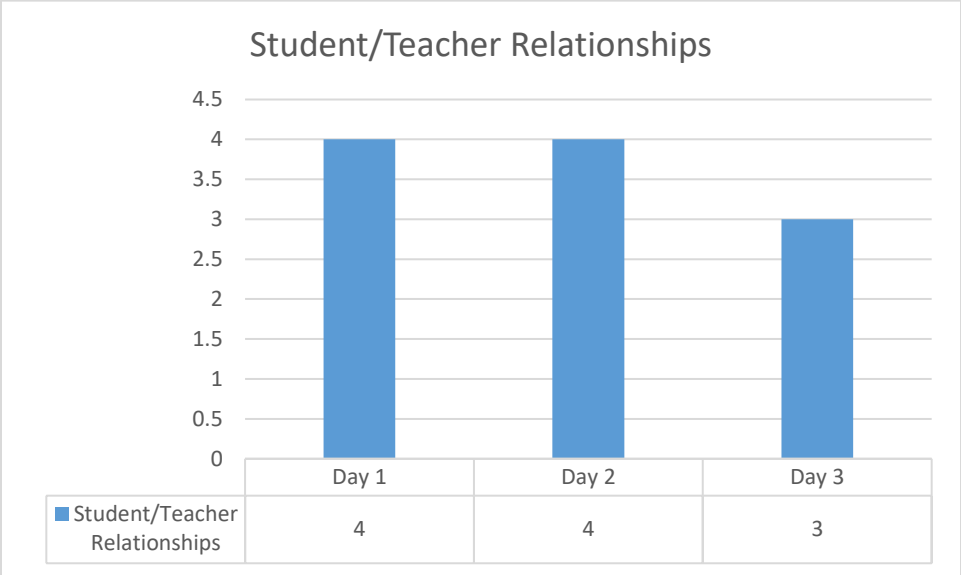


Figure 4.17 Student/Teacher Interactions phase two daily scores.

Following along with the communicative interactions, the student teacher interactions were also aided by the dialogue structure. The teacher became more adept at talking with the students rather than at them. The students were members of the learning community and acted as a resource rather than the arbiter of knowledge.

Exit Tickets

When analyzing the exit tickets, certain themes were useful to show the data that often concurs with the RTOP evaluations. During the first phase students were asked to assess their own level of engagement in the activities. Sixty-four percent of the students expressed that they were highly engaged with the activities, while more than a quarter stated they were moderately engaged. Similarly, in phase two, fifty-nine percent of the students expressed that they were highly engaged with the activities, while thirty-one percent stated they were moderately engaged. In phases one and two, students who felt they were moderately or highly engaged were 92% and 90% respectively.

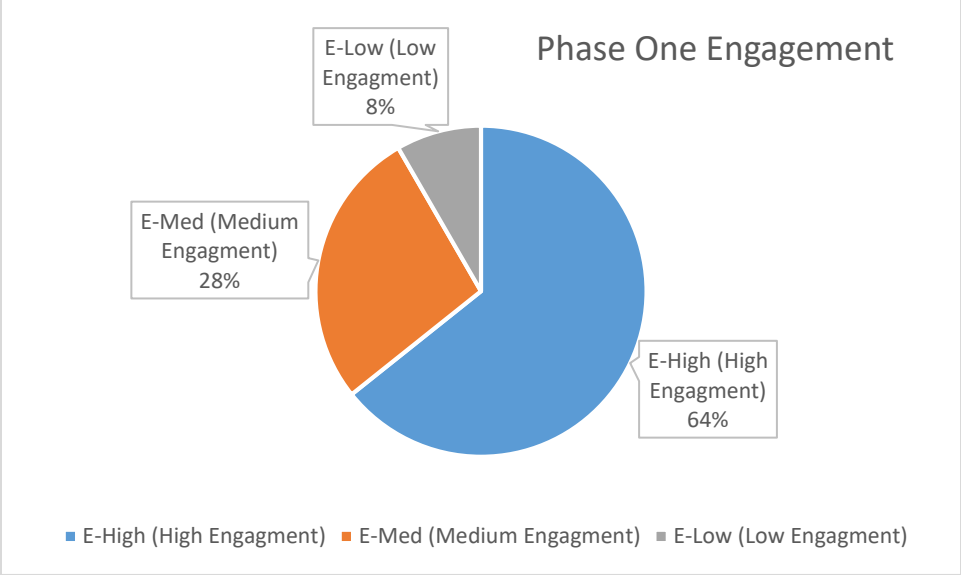


Figure 4.18 Phase one engagement (Average)

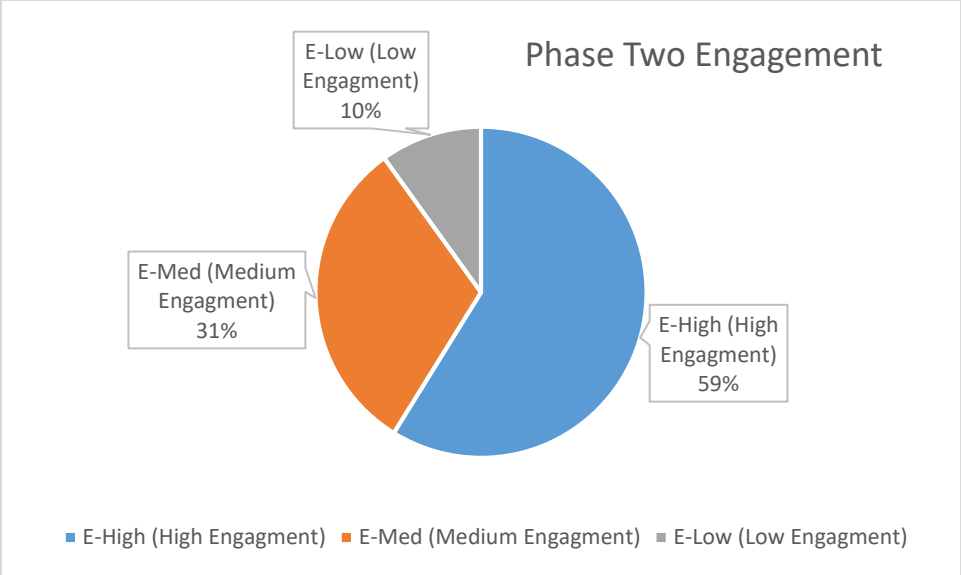


Figure 4.19 Phase two engagement (Average)

Other themes that emerged were that during phase two, students noted that they used dialogs and had more peer-to-peer interactions. These student interactions form the foundations for student-led constructivist activities in which the student themselves direct learning. They enjoyed interacting with their classmates, which could be a reason they remained engaged.

Pretest posttest results

At the start of phase one, an 18-question selected response assessment was given to the students. Out of 18 students enrolled in the class, 16 took both the pretest and posttest. The median raw score of the pretest was 8.5 correct, or 47%. One student, AS, told me he randomly put down answers and by chance only correctly answered one question; therefore, this lowered the median score. At the end of first phase, I gave the students the exact same test. The posttest scores reflected a small increase with a median raw score of 10.0 correct or 56%. The increase in scores from the pretest to posttest

shows a modest increase of 18%. Twelve students increased their score while four students decreased their score.

Table 4.2 Pretest-posttest data from phase one.

Student	Pretest Raw	Pretest Percent	Posttest Raw	Posttest Percent	Increase/ Decrease
NB	15	83%	17	94%	13%
SE	6	33%	8	44%	33%
HF	6	33%	8	44%	33%
JF	6	33%	8	44%	33%
CH	15	83%	13	72%	-13%
TH	6	33%	9	50%	50%
QM	9	50%	11	61%	22%
JM	8	44%	9	50%	13%
AP	12	67%	14	78%	17%
DR	3	17%	8	44%	167%
KR	9	50%	8	44%	-11%
CS	8	44%	9	50%	13%
AS	1	6%	10	56%	900%
MF	9	50%	6	33%	-33%
NS	15	83%	14	78%	-7%
JW	8	44%	9	50%	13%
Total	8.5	47%	10.0625	56%	18%

The pretest-posttest data reflects only moderate gains in content knowledge. This is indicative of the students not following content standards but being allowed to pursue their own interests. The students may have constructed new knowledge and built on prior learning, but this would not be reflected on a set of selected response questions based on the state standards. This demonstrates an undesirable effect of standardized testing shown through the narrowing of the curriculum and limiting students from exploratory learning. Due to time constraints a pretest-posttest was not completed for phase two.

Issues

Though the students claimed they were more engaged when they were presented with more student-centered and rigorous coursework, not all students enjoyed the lessons. Several expressed frustration in working with others or with the perceived difficulty of the assignments. These students would work for a few minutes, become frustrated and then stop working.

During the second trial, four students expressed trouble learning on their exit tickets. Moreover, during the lesson I noticed several students who were visibly frustrated at the assignment. One group spent 10 minutes trying to determine the classification for the first document on the DBQ. I tried to offer slight guidance as I did not want to tell them the answer. The group became even more frustrated with the teacher as they expected the teacher to tell them the answers. I chose to combine their group with a group who had made a lot of progress. That seemed to work well, as the more advanced group guided the frustrated group in finishing the activity.

At any time, when the activities required high level of thinking, several students withdrew and waited for their classmates to do the work. I explained to them that productive struggle is part of the lesson and they must develop the skills necessary to analyze the work. A few students refused to work and got the answers from other groups.

Summary

The findings of this study demonstrate the challenges of creating a student-led classroom in which the constructivist ideology can flourish. By using the RTOP, the teacher-researcher self-evaluated and adjusted future teaching. By reforming teaching and

focusing on student-led inquiry, the teacher empowered students with the ability to direct their own learning to something that was more interesting, which should increase engagement.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The following chapter presents the implications of the findings from this study. The previous four chapters have discussed problems associated with essentialism in a social studies classroom. This study examined the challenges of creating an atmosphere where constructivism can take root and lead to a student driven learning environment. The problem of practice within this study holds that a teacher-centered classroom has failed to increase students' inquiry skills, as well as their analytical abilities, with regard to primary source documents. Furthermore, it has failed to excite the student and resulted in an uninteresting setting where students fail to rise above rote memorization.

Summary of Findings

Chapter four presented findings from two cycles of an action plan where constructivist methods were employed in a classroom of US History students. Using the RTOP evaluation protocols, the teacher-researcher created lessons based on the fundamentals of the reformed teaching pedagogy.

Before phase one was attempted, I gathered a focus group of three students who stated that the class, although informative, lacked peer interactions and could benefit from group assignments in which students could work with their classmates. This focus group indicated that the students believed they would enjoy a more student-led

classroom. The daily exit ticket surveys showed that engagement increased, although not all activities showed high levels of active learning.

The Pre-RTOP surveys illustrated that the teacher followed essentialist pedagogy as the classes were conducted with very little student input. US History is a content laden class and requires all students to take a high-stakes state-mandated test which puts pressure on the teacher to cover a high volume of material as quickly as possible to prepare the students for the EOC. Therein lies the challenge; teacher-led instruction allows for more information to be presented, but the level of engagement and student interaction is low.

One of the main challenges with attempting to reform teaching ideology is accounting for the time that it takes to teach standards and objectives. The time required to teach in a reformed minded classroom is substantially more than in a traditional lecture styled social studies classroom. This is impactful because teaching an entire course using reformed practices would require the teacher to reduce the number of standards covered. However, those standards taught would be understood by more students as the engagement levels and student interactions would increase.

Before phase one, I studied the RTOP to inform my teaching methodology. There were two areas which were generally weaker per the RTOP scoring: procedural knowledge and students-to-student interactions. I purposely designed the lessons that week to address these weaknesses. First the goal was to activate prior knowledge and allow the students to direct their learning. Freedom was given to the students to pursue certain pre-planned topics and time was allowed for exploration. I also made sure my

questioning was appropriate and invoked critical thinking. All answers were acknowledged in a positive way which should have furthered student engagement.

At the start of the first day of phase one, I explained to the class the processes. They had freedom to investigate their ideas to help add to their prior knowledge. The students were engaged and making connections between their prior and newly acquired knowledge. At the end of the exploratory phase I found the first challenge. The students were to interact with each other in an academic setting. As they were working in small groups and interacting I noticed that they were not on-task, but rather talking very informally about topics not related to the content. After I redirected the class they stopped talking with each other, altogether. I realized that they did not know how to work appropriately within groups. It appeared that working in groups meant they worked independently while they talked about personal issues. Overall the class enjoyed the activities as well as the novelty of the reformed classroom.

Day four of the first phase had the students the most engaged. When the lesson started they had some, but not a lot of prior knowledge and their learning was not focused. But after a few days of activities, they had the requisite ideas to make new connections and reconstruct their recently learned prior knowledge. This gave evidence of success. However, the following day when I showed the class three short videos to emphasize certain objectives, the class reverted to low engagement levels with several students sleeping. As soon as the video went on, their heads went down. At the end of the first trial, I felt the data and observations showed the student's needed guidance on how to conduct group work and properly express themselves using academic language.

When phase two began I had to model the correct way for the students to speak to each other in an academic setting. They were presented with a specific dialogue that they had to repeat. After they said the required information in the correct format, they were given the ability to interact freely. This intervention worked, and the students were heard within the class using the proper terminology.

The students were tasked with teaching each other vocabulary terms in a jigsaw activity where the students rotated and taught one another. One of the challenges was that not all the students learned the content vocabulary correctly and had trouble articulating it to the other students. A few students expressed frustration that some students were wrong and wanted me to just tell them the answers. Some students distrusted other students as a source and told me they wished I would just give them the vocabulary. I replied that the activity was supposed to help them learn the words and meaning in the proper context.

Furthermore, during the next activity, the students worked within a series of primary source documents. Unfortunately, the students needed a stimulus to complete the activity. As I allowed them the freedom to choose their own partners, some groups could not analyze these documents and stopped altogether. When redirected they wanted me to tell them the answers and became upset when I guided them rather than give them the answers. These students were not used to being expected to think critically and it was becoming tiresome. A shifting of group members was necessary to involve all students.

Limitations

This action research study contains some limitations that could be mitigated in future studies. The students were enthusiastic and willing to try new activities. However, it was clear from informal observations and through speaking with students that many

expressed frustration with their classmates within the group activities. As students, they found it difficult to effectively collaborate within groups. A lesson that models proper collaboration techniques would be beneficial before this study is attempted again. Moreover, as the cycles of research progressed in this study the reflections helped inform the study and direct adjustments to the lesson regarding collaboration to a minor extent and should be further explored.

The RTOP guidelines state that only those formally trained in observing teachers should use it to inform their teaching. I, however, was not trained and used my best judgment to score my own teaching in a daily self-reflective practice. Near the beginning of the study, I had my department chair observe my class and we then filled the RTOP out together. It helped to have someone else with whom to share and have someone else's objective perspective of the teaching activities. It would be beneficial to attend a conference or further request information on how to become more versed in evaluating using the RTOP, especially if more than one teacher at a school is trained. Moreover, when this study is replicated it would be beneficial to videotape the class and then watch it for evidence while filling out the RTOP. Here everything can be critiqued, and it should give the teacher a more valid evaluation.

In designing future lessons, it is imperative that the RTOP manual is consulted. It acts as a guidebook to what is needed for constructivism to root. Not every metric can be met at the highest score each day, but a reformed lesson plan should address each aspect of the requirements. In fact, sometimes teacher-centered activities are needed to help low-achieving students as they may not benefit as much from a student-centered approach (Wu & Huang, 2007). The data from the pretest-posttest given in during phase

one show, that only modest gains in content attainment were reflected. This illustrates that essentialist teaching methods might be more effective in raising standardized test scores.

One of the interesting finds in this study is that the students were observed to demonstrate signs of cognitive fatigue. The change from an almost solely teacher-led classroom to a reformed model represented a large shift in teaching methodology. The students were used to being receivers of information rather than owners of their learning. This stark change was exciting through the first phase but by the second phase, it was evident that the students were becoming fatigued. Several students stated that they wished I would go back to telling them the answers and that I should continue to lecture. The solution may lie in the development of a classroom setting which fuses constructivism and essentialism. By allowing students to direct their learning through exploration of related topics – and then bringing in their newly acquired knowledge – a teacher may be able to keep the interest of the students during a content enriched lesson.

Action Research Application

In this action research study, the challenges of switching from a standards-based essentialist classroom to a constructivist philosophy by reforming teaching were analyzed. Action research is an on-going process where each iteration informs the next in a seemingly never-ending cycle of improvement and reflection (Mertler, 2014). At the end of the study it is up to the teacher-researcher to inform colleagues of the resulting successes and challenges.

The positive outcomes of reformed teaching and the challenges present in switching ideologies will be communicated with other teachers at faculty professional

development days. The application of best practices in teaching should be shared. The RTOP allows a teacher to evaluate the degree to which their classrooms are reformed. By learning and following the guidelines a teacher can help model effective constructivist teaching pedagogy.

Future research may be needed to perfect the evaluation of the RTOP. Formally adapting the RTOP from an instrument used in science and math classes to one that takes into consideration skills specifically related to the social sciences is necessary to get the most from its guidelines.

Conclusion

This study determined that there were challenges associated with switching to a constructivist pedagogy using reformed teaching methods. The action research methods determined that using the RTOP allows a teacher to implement constructivist teaching in the classroom. By increasing engagement and allowing students the freedom to choose their learning paths, teachers can bring back democratic education. Furthermore, increasing student engagement in the content areas can result in improved learning outcomes and overall achievement.

GLOSSARY

authentic assessments – worthwhile tasks that "require the application of knowledge and skills in real-life situations" as they "place a greater emphasis on problem solving, critical thinking, comprehension, reasoning and metacognition" (Luongo-Orlando, 2003, p. 7). Authentic assessments usually consist of complex tasks that require students to demonstrate real learning.

constructivism– A theory of learning based on the teaching philosophy of Jean Piaget. It states that learning focuses on cognitive development rather than a narrow skillset, where learners organize the information as they attempt to build or create meaning. The learners will initiate their own questions based on what is relevant to themselves which allows students to take ownership and produce meaningful results (Fosnot, 2005).

disciplinary literacy – skills that emphasize "the knowledge and abilities possessed by those who create, communicate, and use knowledge within the disciplines". This is different than content literacy in the way that experts in the specific discipline interact with text (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012, p. 8)

document based questions (DBQ) – tasks students are given in which they must analyze documents. These documents are usually from primary or secondary sources in the forms of speeches, diary entries, photographs, maps, charts, graphs, political cartoons, etc. The tasks involve the student critically examining the documents in order to answer an overarching question. It is often accompanied by an open response essay where the student will defend their interpretation of the documents. The goal, beyond learning to analyze historical documents, is to develop the student's writing and thinking (Noonan, 1999).

end of course exam (EOC) – a comprehensive summative assessment given to students in certain content areas. From the perspective of this action research study conducted in South Carolina, these high-stakes assessments are mandated by the state and comprise 20% of the student's overall grade.

essentialism – educational theory that stresses the importance of basic skills like the 3-R's: reading, writing and arithmetic. The essentialist classroom is led by a well-informed teacher who leads instruction and sits in a position of authority.

graphic organizers – graphical representations of concepts often used to explain complex ideas and relational aspects between ideas.

historical knowledge – the centerpiece of critical thinking within the social studies; it is based upon the notion that students must move beyond simple knowledge of facts and be able to analyze the significance of historical events, including sequencing and relational purposes and influences (Breakstone, 2014)

learner-centered ideology - the belief that "schools should be enjoyable places where people develop naturally according to their own innate natures (Schiro, 2013, p. 5).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – In 2001, President George Bush pushed for educational reforms that included setting standards and goals, and has led to the growth of state mandated assessments as a way to prove growth. Punitive measures would be enforced if districts did not meet minimum goals of achievement.

primary source – original sources of historical information, which often include speeches, diary entries, photographs, cartoons, maps, and physical artifacts.

secondary source – historical information that is represented through second hand accounts. Examples include textbooks and encyclopedias.

social reconstructionist ideology – the belief that by analyzing the ills of society, and involving themselves in the creation of answers to these problems, students can affect social change while learning (Schiro, 2013).

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APPENDIX A
CONSENT/ASSENT PERMISSION FORMS

NAME:	DATE OF PROPOSAL:
School/Location:	Principal/Supervisor
Email address:	University Professor:
SCHOOL(S), CLASSROOM or LOCATION IN WHICH PROJECT IS BEING CONDUCTED:	
APPROVAL RECEIVED FROM DATE: PRINCIPAL OR IMMEDIATE RESEARCH START YES NO ESTIMATED COMPLETION DATE:	

Research Project Description

1. Title of Research Project:
2. Describe the primary purpose of the research as well as the measurable objectives of the project. **Examples**: "The aim of this study is to____(Determine/Measure/Gather information on/ Investigate the consequences/Test the theory/Analyze the impact/Develop deeper understanding of___.

3. Provide a brief description of the research and how it will address improvement of educational policy, programs or practices:

How does the Research Project align with the strategic mission and vision of the [redacted], a specific school or classroom? If a section is not applicable to your Research Project, indicate N/A.

- District/School strategic plan and educational goals to improve student achievement:
- Research-based strategies related to improving districts, schools, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and improving learning for all students:
- Improvement of learning for all students in the targeted student population(s):
- Standards-based instruction and assessment, (CCSS, SC State Standards, College-Career Ready etc.)
- Professional development and support for instructional or support staff:
- Supervision and evaluation of instructional staff (and non-instructional staff, if applicable):
- Diverse learning needs of students:
- Use of technologies designed to enhance teaching and learning,
- Creating a safe, nurturing and orderly school environment that is conducive to learning for all students
- Engaging Parents, Community or Business partners

Data Requests: Please describe in detail any data or information that you are requesting from the District. This would include requests to administer surveys, conduct observations etc. Please be as specific as possible.

Other Relevant Comments:

My signature below certifies that:

- I have received a copy of the *Guidelines and Procedures for Conducting Research Affiliated with* [redacted] *County Schools* and that I will comply fully with the policies and procedures outlined as part of my research
- I have reviewed all relevant policies and procedures as outlined in that document related to responsible conduct in research including those related to ethical conduct and confidentiality.
- I understand that while working as a researcher under the supervision of a [redacted] County School District employee, I may have access to records and files that contain confidential information and that it is the employer's obligation to protect the rights of these files and/or individuals and that
- I will follow the operating practices and procedures required while handling these records and will not inappropriately access or disclose this information.
- I acknowledge that if I misrepresent or omit any information as requested on this application I have jeopardized my continued association with [redacted] County School District and is cause for forfeiture of consideration

Researcher Name:

_____

Print or Type name

Researcher Signature _____

Date _____

Reviewed by:
May 4, 2016

Dear [Parent/guardian]:

My name is [redacted]. I am a teacher at [redacted] High School.

I am conducting an action research study to examine the impact of vocabulary and reading strategies on student achievement. Specifically, I am interested to see if reading primary source documents and analyzing historical artifacts, as well as studying content vocabulary will lead to students performing better on assessments. I am planning to use the data from two-assessments and a survey that your child will complete.

Your child's participation will involve responding to a brief survey that asks them to describe their level of engagement during our Civil Rights unit. The survey will take approximately 5 minutes. I will also compare the data from a pre- and post-assessment to see if any student growth was achieved. The results of this study will allow myself and other teachers develop strategies to help students understand vocabulary and be able to better teach content.

If you or your child chooses not to participate, there will be no penalty. It will not affect your child's grade, treatment, services rendered, and so forth, to which you or your child may otherwise be entitled. Your child's participation is voluntary, and he/she is free to withdraw from participation at any time without suffering ramifications. The results of the research study may be published, but your child's name will not be used. Data collected will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone. I will destroy all data within one year of completing the study.

If you have any question concerning this study of your child's participation in this study, please feel free to contact me at [redacted]

[redacted]

US History Teacher

By signing below, I give consent for my child to participate in the above-referenced study.

Parent's name: _____ Child's name: _____

Parent's signature: _____

[Source: Mertler, C. A. (2014). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (4th ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.]

May 4, 2016

Dear [Student]:

I am conducting an action research study to examine the impact of vocabulary and reading strategies on student achievement. Specifically, I am interested to see if reading primary source documents and analyzing historical artifacts, as well as studying content vocabulary will lead to students performing better on assessments. I am planning to use the data from two-assessments and a survey that you will complete.

Your participation will involve responding to a brief survey that will ask you to describe your level of engagement during our Civil Rights unit. The survey will take approximately 5 minutes. I will also compare the data from a pre- and post-assessment to see if any student growth was achieved. The results of this study will allow myself and other teachers develop strategies to help students understand vocabulary and be able to better teach content.

If you choose not to participate, no one will be angry with you and there will be no penalty. It will not affect your grade in any way. Your participation is voluntary, which also means that you can change your mind and stop participating at any time. Your name will not appear anywhere on your data; the survey will be conducted anonymously. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. Your answers to the survey will not be shared with anyone. I will destroy all surveys within one year of completing the study.

If you have any question about my study, you can ask me at any time. If you want to contact me with your questions you may do so at [redacted] or

[redacted]

US History Teacher

Please check on of the following:

_____ YES. I want to be in the study. I understand the study will be done during class time. I understand that, even if I check "yes" now, I can change my mind later.	_____ NO. I do not want to be in the study.

Your name: _____ Signature: _____

[Source: Mertler, C. A. (2014). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (4th ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.]

APPENDIX B

INSTRUCTIONAL PLANS

Introduction	The teacher will begin the lesson by introducing the lesson, hand out the student log, write names of the 4 people on the board – Martin Luther King, Jr, Malcolm X, Lyndon Johnson (LBJ) and Richard Nixon.	Students will get into groups of three and choose one of the historical figures. They will spend 20 minutes researching anything they would like on this person. The student will fill out a sheet containing resources used and any interesting facts learned.
Task	The class will be divided into groups of three. These groups are student picked. The class will be given historical documents relating to the Civil Rights movement. These will include photographs, political	The students will listen to the lecture and take notes. The students will then complete a series of authentic assessments using information they obtained independently or through the DBQ packet.

	cartoons, speeches, excerpts from novels, etc.	This DBQ will act as a scaffold by helping the students become used to working with historical artifacts.
Research and Investigation	The students will undertake research and investigate the topic. The teacher will monitor and guide individuals or groups.	Using the historical documents provided, the students will begin to develop an idea of what life was like during the 1950's-1960's. They will also be using the internet to research more specific topics and obtain information and pictures to use.
Collaboration	The students will interact with their groups, asking and answering questions to explore the topic.	Students will determine who does what. Perhaps some groups will all work together on each component, or maybe they will divide up the activities. They should be discussing the topic and giving advice to their partners.
Presentation	One part of the project (diary, Photostory, or poster) will be presented to the class.	The students will choose a portion of their project to present to the class. During and after the presentation, bonus points will be awarded to the students who ask

		the presenters well-reasoned questions.
Reflection and transfer	The students will reflect.	The students will complete a reflection assignment where they will both reflect on what they have learned and how it changed their view of the Civil Rights Movement. Also, they will reflect on how each partner contributed within the group.
Resources	Lecture resources (notes) Document Based Questions (DBQ) packet Computer/tablet Internet Software programs (photo story, power point) Poster board Markers	