Thinking Like an Historian: Improving Engagement Through Project-Based Learning in a United States History Classroom

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THINKING LIKE AN HISTORIAN: IMPROVING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN A UNITED STATES HISTORY CLASSROOM

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. Without their support, I would not have been able to complete this doctorate program. My wife Melissa has been a wonderful listener, allowing me to dominate our neighborhood walks with conversations about various learning theories. My parents, George and Elizabeth, for being my first teachers and showing me the importance of helping others. Lastly, my son George IV. He was born during this doctorate program and it was always fun to take a break from writing this dissertation to play with him.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research study is to determine the efficacy of project-based learning activities for improving students’ critical thinking skills and engagement in the classroom. South Carolina’s creation of the United States History end-of-course assessment has led many social studies teachers to design ‘teach to the test’ lesson plans, which this researcher’s students seem to find mundane and uninspiring. Although these teaching methods have helped some students perform well on the end-of-course test, these tactics have sapped their interest in social studies and have not prepared them to be responsible citizens in an active democracy. The social studies project-based learning curriculum is designed to use a student-centered instructional approach that allows the students to investigate historical events through a series of problem-solving activities, with the intention of increasing their critical thinking skills and intrinsic motivational levels in the classroom. The action research took place over a six-week period in the spring of 2020 in an AP United States History classroom with twenty-three participants at an urban high school in South Carolina and used a mixed-methods approach to determine the success of the PBL curriculum. Data collection methods included pre and post intervention assessments, teacher observational notes, questionnaires, and student interviews.

Keywords: Project-based learning, Inquiry-based learning, Group investigations, Collaborative learning, Critical thinking skills, Student engagement, Intrinsic motivation
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC ........................................................................................................... Academic Controversy Technique
EOCEP ................................................................................................ End of Course Examination Program
GRR ......................................................................................................... Gradual Release Responsibility
PBL ......................................................................................................... Project-Based Learning
SDT ....................................................................................................... Self-Determination Theory
ZPD ....................................................................................................... Zone of Proximal Development
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

When I graduated from Winthrop University in 2009, at the height of the Great Recession, there were few teaching jobs available. A week before the school year started I received one interview and job offer. The position was as a social studies teacher at Scott’s Branch High School in Clarendon School District One, a rural and impoverished area of South Carolina. As a young social studies educator, I was tasked with teaching United States History. I was thrilled with the opportunity since U.S. History, with the state’s end-of-course examination, is considered by many administrators and teachers to be the most important social studies course. I began my lesson planning by reading the state’s American History standards and was immediately overwhelmed by the amount of historical content the students were required to know for the EOC assessment (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). This problem was compounded by the format of the standardized test since it only consisted of fact-based multiple-choice questions. After reading, all of the standards and analyzing previous test questions, I decided the only way to present all of the material to the students was through direct instruction or teacher-guided lectures.

Even though I created colorful PowerPoints with condensed historical notes, I constantly struggled to maintain the students’ attention and uphold the stamina to deliver a lecture day-after-day. Eventually I supplemented my lesson plans with textbook reading for the students. As the semester progressed the students would ask, “Why do we need to
learn this?” or “Why is this important?” or “Who cares about a bunch of old dead white guys?” Sadly, because I was so focused on the EOC test, I would usually respond to the students’ questions by answering, “Because it’s in the standards.”

At the conclusion of the semester, my principal was thrilled with the EOC results since they were the highest scores in the school’s history. However, unlike my administrator, I had a feeling of disappointment as I pondered whether I had failed my students. Within a few months of taking the standardized test, I suspected many of my students’ knowledge of the United States would diminish since they had not increased their critical thinking skills or enjoyment in social studies. A student summarized their classroom experience by saying, “Mr. Gray I like you. You are really nice. But history just sucks!”

During my early years of teaching social studies, I was a part of this cycle of falsehoods that believed it was enough to just show the students the historical information and give textbook activities for them to understand the content. As a novice teacher, I also could not comprehend my students’ lack of interest in the class since I was very passionate about history. With the help of teacher mentors and independent research, I came to realize that the lowest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, recall and memorization, are not enough to help the students improve their critical thinking skills (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Clark, 2018; Clayson, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Jones, 2015; Kafai & Resnick, 1995; Kokotaski, et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). I have concluded that my early lesson plans created a classroom of uninterested students since I failed to provide them choices within the curriculum and relate our past to current events (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Howard, 2014; Martelli
I have become increasingly convinced that, cumbersome standards, unsustainable teaching timetables, and high-stakes standardized testing have stripped away the important teaching tools of choice, creativity, and diversity from the classroom and left students disengaged, frustrated, and unlearned (Greene, 2014; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Kenna & Russell, 2015; Kozol, 1991; Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Strauss, 2017).

These revelations about classroom instruction and my background as a social studies teacher have led me to connect my teaching philosophy with Thomas Jefferson’s phrase in the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and persons] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, [and] that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” As an educator, I believe it is important to acknowledge the value of all students and the impact a positive academic experience can have on their future civic responsibilities. Since “all men [and persons] are created equal,” it is vital for our society to provide all children with a first-rate education. Another component of my philosophy is the acknowledgement that students have different types of learning styles and interests, similar to Jefferson’s wording of “pursuit of happiness.”

Consequently, teachers need to adopt a student-centered instructional approach to support the students’ differing learning abilities and interest in the material. As it relates to the social studies classroom, instructors need to change their curriculum, “from a set of known facts to a process of investigation” (Ogle et al., 2007). By using project-based learning activities, teachers can help stimulate the students’ interest and ownership of the historical content, which will benefit their critical thinking skills and engagement in the
classroom. With enhanced abilities students can become active and productive citizens in their communities and our democratic government, for as Jefferson said, “A nation, as a society, forms a moral person, and every member of it is personally responsible for his society.”

**Problem of Practice**

Throughout South Carolina’s social studies classrooms, students are not improving their critical thinking skills or engagement levels (Emdin, 2016; Esquith, 2013; Greene, 2014; Howard, 2014; Kenna & Russell, 2015; Kozol, 2005; Prothero, 2020; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018). The United States History course consists of eight standards with hundreds of pages of fact-based content and an end-of-course assessment with 55 multiple-choice questions (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). To accommodate for the large amount of historical information and the standardized assessment, numerous educators have resorted to ‘teaching to the test’ (Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018). Many of these direct instructional approaches are merely testing the students’ recall abilities, and as a result pushing many of them to dislike their history classes. The problem of practice for this action research study is that high school students enrolled in United States History are being instructed on the lowest ladders of Bloom’s Taxonomy; therefore, the students are not improving their critical thinking skills and are becoming disengaged with the historical information (Emdin, 2016; Esquith, 2013; Greene, 2014; Griffin, 2015; Howard, 2014; Kozol, 1991; Ogle, et al., 2007; Ravitch, 2016; Strauss, 2017; Soares & Wood, 2010).

With ‘teach-to-the-test’ methods, social studies teachers are making their curriculums easier and not helping their students develop their critical literacy skills.
A survey of social studies teachers in 2015 noted that 90% of them used a traditional teaching method of lecturing more than 50% of the time (Kenna & Russell, 2015). Other examples of poor teaching techniques include fill-in-the-blank note packets, vocabulary worksheets, and textbook reading assignments (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Clayson, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2008; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). The social studies teachers who use these practices believe in the same falsehoods I once held, that the students’ mere exposure to the historical material is enough for them to learn the information and perform well on their EOC assessment (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Emdin, 2016; Esquith, 2013; Kenna & Russell, 2015; Kozol, 2005; Larmer, 2018; Spring, 2018). However, this mindset does not match the statistical results: students have continuously performed poorly on the United States History assessment, with 32.2% of students failing the test and an average score of only 69.2% (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). In addition, the lowest test scores belong to minority students, with African American students having the highest failure rate with 5.11% and the lowest overall average with 61.4% (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). Scholars suggest the students receiving ‘teach-to-test’ instruction are getting poor EOC scores because they are not improving their critical literacy skills (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Kokotsaki et al., 2016).

Throughout my career, I have counseled with many United States History teachers about the quick pace of the course and standardized curriculum. Teachers voice complaints such as, “The kids are just going to have to sit and listen because I only have
3 days to cover the Civil War.” Another common complaint is, “I don’t understand why the kids don’t do their homework. It is so easy; they are just copying key terms.” I, too, once held to these beliefs, but overtime I began to realize that students wanted to have an academic pathway that provided them with choices, challenging assignments, and a welcoming classroom atmosphere. This teaching framework required dynamic classroom activities that used the highest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy with autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Kokotsaki, et al., 2016; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Parsons, 2018).

The poor instructional methods of teacher-guided PowerPoint lectures and textbook activities that do not show the relevance of the historical content; have led numerous students to lose their academic initiative and become disengaged in the classroom (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Kenna & Russell, 2015; Ogle, et al., 2007). A Washington Post analysis concluded that students enrolled in history courses were “largely indifferent” or showed “negative attitudes” towards their classes (Strauss, 2017). Within these social studies classrooms, the students are memorizing dates, persons, and historical terms. The students are not making connections between their personal experiences and the historical content and applying their knowledge to the betterment of their communities (Clark, 2018; Clayson, 2018; Emdin, 2016; Esquith, 2013; Greene, 1978; Ogle, et al., 2007). This lack of knowledge and detachment within the classroom has disproportionately affected minority and impoverished students, leading to higher rates of retention, suspension, and dropout, and widening the achievement gap (Howard, 2014; Kozol, 1991, 2005; Lopez, 2018; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018).
In my first year of instructing the United States History course at Scott’s Branch High School, I created a Civil Rights Movement lesson plan that followed the state standards. I did not teach the students about their community’s history and the important role Clarendon School District One played in the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1950s, a court case known as *Briggs v. Elliot* challenged the illegal segregation of the bus transportation in the school district. The court case was ultimately consolidated into *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* that desegregated all public schools (Brinkley, 2015). In the lesson plan, I stressed the achievements of desegregation and marked it as a turning point in American history. However, this PowerPoint lecture did not match the students’ personal experiences: at the time, Scott’s Branch High School was still segregated with a student population of 95% African American (Gilreath, 2020; South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). Many of the white children in the school district attended Clarendon Hall and Robert E. Lee Academy, the local private schools created in the early 1960s, shortly after the government’s integration of public schools (Brinkley, 2015; South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). This example highlights the overarching problem of a lack of student engagement in the classroom since the standardized historical content did not match the students’ real-world experiences.

Clearly, there is a link between the students’ poor assessment results and low levels of motivation in the classroom because of teacher-centered instructional methods and an uninspiring social studies curriculum (Beck, 2005; Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2008; Mann & Robinson, 2009; Slavin, 1994; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wilhelm, 2007). In contrast to
previous generations of educators that focused on student growth and improvements in a
democratic society, the current wave of education reform has demoralized students and
teachers. To rollback, this standardized testing wave, social studies teachers need to
change their curriculums to support project-based learning activities that empower the
students and reenergize the classroom atmosphere (Mann & Robinson, 2009, Ogle et al.,
2007; Ravitch, 2016; Schmoker, 2011; Spring, 2018).

**Purpose of the Study**

The traditional social studies curriculum needs to be converted into a learner-
centered curriculum with project-based learning activities that help students learn on the
highest ladders of Bloom’s Taxonomy and increase their intrinsic motivational levels in
the classroom. The PBL social studies curriculum transforms the students from spectators
to investigators of historical events through a series of problem-solving projects (Ogle et
al., 2007). Unlike recall or memorization activities, these projects enhance students’
critical thinking skills (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Barbara et al., 1996; Daniels & Steinke,
2004; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer, 2018; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Martelli &
Watson, 2016). The projects will also give the students the ability to express their
personal experiences and viewpoints. With this type of curriculum flexibility and
ownership, students can become more interested in the historical material (Chiodo &
Byford, 2004; Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Griffin, 2015; Soares & Wood, 2010; Ogle et
al., 2007; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). The purpose of this action research study is to
explore the impacts a PBL curriculum can have on students’ critical literacy skills and
engagement levels in a high school United States History classroom.
The project-based learning instructional method advocates for a student-centered approach that allows participants to form groups and investigate historical events. In this academic framework, the students act as historians by developing their own questions, analyzing historical documents, and with their own historical viewpoints debating with their classmates (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Ogle et al., 2007; Svihla & Reeve, 2016). Unlike in traditional classrooms, the role of the teacher in the PBL curriculum is as a facilitator of the material who does not give guided lectures or direct instruction of the content (Jones, 2015; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). As a result, the students are responsible for their learning experience, and this increased ownership of the curriculum will hopefully enhance their critical thinking skills (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Svihla & Reeve, 2016).

Within these collaborative learning communities, the students will be making connections between historical and contemporary events. It is also important for students to study and understand other cultures, customs, and viewpoints (Beck, 2005; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Ogle et al., 2007; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). A major component of a successful classroom environment is the teacher’s ability to understand the positionality of all of the students, which increases the students’ intrinsic motivations when the curriculum reflects their ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The keys to improving students’ interest in the classroom is to engaged them in the material and ensure they understand the purpose and relevance of the historical information (Beck, 2005; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Ogle et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2011; Soares & Wood, 2010).
A major objective of the United States History course is to prepare the children for citizenship in the 21st century. Although not all of the children enrolled in the course are American citizens, some important tenets of citizenship are universal for all thoughtful individuals. These traits include the capacity to work within groups of differing viewpoints, to construct new knowledge, and to have personal accountability and responsibility for one's actions. The PBL social studies curriculum equips the students with the necessary skills to become active and productive citizens in their family structures, neighborhoods, and communities (Barbara et al., 1996; Greene, 1978; Kokotaski et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010).

**Research Question**

With the aim of investigating the successes and challenges of project-based learning activities within my AP United States History classroom, I have proposed the following research question: How does a social studies curriculum that emphasizes project-based learning activities influence student critical thinking and engagement with the historical content?

**Theoretical Framework**

The central component of my theoretical framework places the students in the center of the learning experience and responds to the negative impacts of testing accountability (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Clark, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Flinders & Thornton, 2017; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; King & King, 2017; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Schmoker, 2011). Student-centered learning environments emphasize the use of personal experiences and empathy in the curriculum (Boytchev, 2015; Dewey, 1938; Piaget,
1973). To increase critical thinking skills and engagement in a social studies classroom, students should act as historians, learning from past events in a series of problem-solving activities (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Svihla & Reeve, 2016). Moreover, as acting historians the students will develop an essential question, analyze past and present events, and use their personal experiences to develop their own conclusions.

With a foundation in Dewey’s progressivism and Piaget’s constructivism, I analyzed data from my participants’ through a theoretical framework of self-determination theory (SDT), dialogic theory, and critical literacy theory. Throughout the intervention, the components of SDT, which include autonomy, competence, and relatedness, informed my efforts to give students more accountability and responsibility over their learning experiences (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jones, 2009; Wentzel, 2009). Another key feature of the PBL curriculum is the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), used to create communities of inquiry that allow participants to share their diverse experiences and develop collaborative knowledge (Moll, 2014; Wells, 2004). Critical literacy theory also plays a role in these communities of inquiry or investigative groups because the students are analyzing documents and forming their own knowledge and interpretations (Beck, 2005; Clark, 2018; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Schiro, 2013; Soares & Wood, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). Again, it is important for the students to understand that much of social studies is not a set of facts but a series of differing interpretations (Dewey, 1938; Greene, 1978; Moll, 2014; Wells, 2004; Wineburg & Martin, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). All of these
learning theories are instrumental in having a successful PBL curriculum and helping the students become self-directed learners and productive citizens.

**Action Research Design and PBL Curriculum**

The action research project is different from other forms of research since it allows the researcher, to improve their own teaching methods by taking an active part in the intervention and data collection (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014). My action research is in accordance with this design since the research site was my AP United States History classroom and the participants were my students. This phenomenological study took place over a 6-week period in the spring of 2020 and investigated the successes and challenges of project-based learning for improving the students’ critical thinking skills and engagement. I used a narrative inquiry approach to analyze the participants’ attitudes toward social studies and the project-based learning activities. I used both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The participants took a pre and post intervention assessment to investigate potential correlations between their engagement in PBL and possible improvements in their test scores. The students also completed a questionnaire to gauge their perceptions of previous experiences in social studies classrooms in relation to the action research. Lastly, I took observational notes and conducted student interviews. These data collection methods gave me insight into the students’ critical thinking skills and attitudes toward social studies (Creswell, 2014; Kinsler, 2010).

In the action research classroom, I became a facilitator of the PBL curriculum or *Taking Sides* project and coached the students through the four stages of the program, using the gradual release of responsibility (GRR) method and academic controversy
technique (Boytchev, 2015; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Harvey & Goudvis, 2005; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Jacobs, 2010; King & King, 2007; Larmer & Mercedoller, 2010; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Schmoker, 2011; Wilhem, 2007). In the first stage, I provide a central question with real-world applications and an overview of the historical material. Next, I divided the students into collaborative learning communities or groups of investigation and provided historical texts to help them on their inquiry-based learning. In the third phase, the students conducted independent research and constructed their artifacts or argumentative essays. To conclude the intervention, I reviewed the students’ essays and supervised their presentations and classroom debate. As far as the GRR framework, all of the stages of the Taking Sides project had elements of focused instruction, guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent learning (Fisher & Frey, 2013). The academic controversy technique informed my design of the essential question and group activities to encourage conversation, debate, and interpretation amongst the participants (Jacobs, 2010).

Conclusion

In many of South Carolina’s social studies classrooms, teachers are designing ‘teach to the test’ lesson plans that are not helping to improve students’ critical thinking skills or interest in the historical material (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Kozol, 1991; Larmer, 2018; Ravitch, 2016; Schmoker, 2011; Strauss, 2017). To fix these problems, social studies teachers need to adopt a project-based learning curriculum that allows the students to investigate historical events through a series of inquiry-based activities (Beck, 2005; Ciardiello, 2004; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Ogle et al., 2007). Turning the students into historians, will enable them to connect their personal
experiences to the content and express their own historical viewpoints. Thus, the students will increase their critical thinking skills and engagement levels in the classroom. The project-based learning curriculum can also equip the children with learning tools to be investigative historians and active citizens in their communities.
CHAPTER 2

RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous social studies teachers are using direct-instructional methods and textbook reading activities that are turning the students into passive and unengaged onlookers in the classroom (Kozol, 2005; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018). On the other hand, student-centered instructional methods and project-based learning activities are providing students with opportunities to become active leaders by solving problems and creating artifacts that demonstrate their knowledge of the material (Clark, 2018; Daniels & Steineke, 2004; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). With the intention of designing an action research study that focused on the importance of critical thinking skills and intrinsic motivation in a social studies classroom, I reviewed the existing literature related material connected to my problem of practice.

This literature review consists of three sections, with the first part giving an historical overview of the impacts contemporary government regulations and accountability standards have had on teachers and students. The next section provides a theoretical framework of self-determination theory, dialogic theory, and critical literacy theory, which serve as the basis for measuring the effects of the PBL curriculum or Taking Sides project. The last section gives an analysis of science, math, and social studies classrooms that use project-based learning activities, with a focus on social justice. In conducting this literature review, I used a variety of sources that encompassed the University of South Carolina’s database, JSTOR digital library, articles from the New

**Historical Lessons in Education**

With the intention of understanding the importance of the theoretical framework and Taking Sides project, the reader must appreciate the positives of active learners versus the negatives of passive learners in a social studies classroom. Progressivism and constructivism are important pillars of the student-centered instructional design since these academic philosophies have encouraged students to create new knowledge and artifacts out of their personal learning experiences (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Clayson, 2018; Jones, 2015; Kafai & Resnick, 1995). However, the current trend in social studies classrooms has advocated for a top-down approach that stops the children from sharing their viewpoints and cultural heritage in the classroom (Howard, 2014; Schmoker, 2011; Spring, 2018; Strauss, 2017). These destructive teaching methods ignore the advice of Dewey (1938), Piaget (1973) and Vygotsky (1978), and convert students into passive thinkers and unproductive citizens (Griffin, 2015; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018).

**Lessons in Active and Self-Directed Learners**

Dewey (1938) sparked the progressive era of educational reform that emphasized student experiences, purposeful learning, and freedom of choice in the classroom. Unlike previous educational theorists, Dewey believed the curriculum should not be limited to general information, but instead help prepare students to become active citizens in a democracy (Boytchev, 2015; Dewey, 1938). As a result, he encouraged teachers to use real-world situations and examples in their lesson plans (Dewey, 1938; Boytchev, 2015).
This type of pragmatic instruction is at the core of the *Taking Sides* project since it is trying to show the students how their personal experiences and contemporary events relate to historical incidents.

Piaget (1973) and his studies on the theory of cognitive development, further enhanced the progressive educational philosophy. He reinforced the learner-centered instructional format since he believed, “learning [was] a continuous process where a student assimilates knowledge entities into meaningful knowledge constructs” (Clark, 2018, p. 180). He showed educators the importance of allowing students to combine their existing knowledge with new material to maximize their learning, with the intention of increasing critical thinking skills and engagement (Clark, 2018; Piaget, 1973). This type of knowledge is central to the *Taking Sides* project since the program is designed to help students create their own historical interpretations and not simply memorize information.

Vygotsky (1978) was another educational theorist to suggest that students can gain higher levels of critical thinking through the combination of cultural relationships and personal experiences (Moll, 2014; Wells, 2004). He advocated for a student-centered pedagogy that stressed a social constructivist approach to learning and the zone of proximal development (Moll, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2004). These features would allow the teacher and students to form a community of inquiry and learn from their shared and diverse experiences to construct a new understanding and outlook on the classroom material (Moll, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2004). An essential feature of the *Taking Sides* project has the students forming groups of investigators to analyze, interpret, and debate historical documents.
Even though Vygotsky (1978) was a critic of Piaget (1973), there is assimilation and accommodation between the two theorists, especially related to the role of the teacher and student in the classroom (Moll, 2014; Wells, 2004). Both theorists promoted a learning environment in which the role of the teacher was to assist the students in the learning process and not force the children to memorize information (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Jones, 2015; Kafai & Resnick, 1995; Moll, 2014; Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2004). This puts a greater responsibility on the instructor and learner since neither participant can be a passive spectator in the classroom. In this learning environment the teacher needs to develop relatable activities and the students need to take ownership of the learning process (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Dewey, 1938; Moll, 2014; Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2004). This type of academic structure also enables the student to show their creativity and unique viewpoints in the artifacts (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Jones, 2015; Kafai & Resnick, 1995). Subsequently, this creative thinking and curiosity increases the student engagement and participation in the classroom (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; King & King, 2017).

**Lessons in Standardized Testing and Passive Learners**

Despite the successes of Dewey (1938), Piaget (1973) and Vygotsky (1978), the present movement of accountability and standardized testing threaten to overturn the student-centered curriculum (Griffin, 2015; Ravtich, 2016; Spring, 2018). Unlike previous educators, who created individualized curriculums to improve their students’ skills to be successful outside of the classroom, these new educational standards are only focused on test scores (Brinkley, 2015; Ravtich, 2016; Spring, 2018). Many historians
believe the accountability movement began in 1983 when the federal government published the report *A Nation at Risk*, which highlighted, “a rising tide of mediocrity in the schools” (Ravitch, 2016, p. 338). This mindset of a failing school system gave credence to the use of a one-size-fits-all curriculum and standardized testing to encourage teacher and student productivity (Kozol, 2005; Ravitch, 2016; Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Spring, 2018). However, these practices have had the reverse effect and prevented equity in the public school system by widening the achievement gap, ignoring personalized growth, and lowering student engagement levels in the classroom (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Griffin, 2015; Howard, 2014; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018).

During the presidency of George W. Bush, a bipartisan coalition of Republicans and Democrats passed the *No Child Left Behind Act*. The purpose of this educational reform bill was to test all students in reading and mathematics, forcing schools to reach proficiency by 2014 (Ravitch, 2016). State legislatures were required to create standards and examinations for their high school students. In South Carolina, the legislature created a series of curriculum standards and four end-of-course exams for high school students in English, Biology, Algebra, and United States History (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). These assessments were then used to measure the performance of schools, regardless of the students’ previous academic records, socioeconomic status, or schools’ monetary funds. Schools that constantly failed to meet their target goals were in jeopardy of losing students or closing (Ravitch, 2016). These standardized curriculums and tests have demoralized students and created a frenzy of panic amongst teachers and administrators, which has further led to the decline of the public school system (Kozol, 2005; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018).
President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top program exacerbated these problems. In this program, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan allotted five billion dollars to school districts that adapted, “new common standards and tests [the Common Core States Standards]; expand[ed] the number of charter schools; [and] evaluate[d] the effectiveness of teachers in significant part by the test scores of their students” (Ravitch, 2016, p. 439). This program cemented the role of standardized testing in the public school system to determine the success or failure of the students, teachers, and schools.

Unlike European or Asian countries whose founding was based on an ethnicity, race, or religious doctrine, the United States was created on the philosophical principle of “pursuit of happiness” and the belief that, “all men [and person] are created equal.” With the aim of upholding these principles, the public educational system needs to rid itself of ridiculous accountability standards and recall based multiple-choice assessments. These terrible curriculums and poor teaching methods are not reflective of the students’ personal backgrounds and do not give them productive skills (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Emdin, 2016; Esquith, 2013; Greene, 2014; Griffin, 2015; Kozol, 2005; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018). In contrast, the learning theories of progressivism and constructivism have provided educators with a blueprint for a successful curriculum that relies on learner-centered instructional approaches to increase students’ critical thinking skills and intrinsic motivation (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Dewey, 1990; Moll, 2014; Schiro, 2013; Slavin, 1994).

**Theoretical Framework**

With a foundation in progressivism and constructivism, the student-centered instructional method places a premium on learning application versus memorization of
historical facts (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Dewey, 1938; Moll, 2014; Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2004). As a result, the theoretical framework used to measure the effects of the Taking Sides project in my social studies classroom, consists of self-determination theory, dialogic theory, and critical literacy theory. All of these learning theories place an emphasis on transforming the students into active and self-directed learners. In other words, the students were to think like historians, placing a premium on their critical thinking skills and intrinsic motivation.

**Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), shows that a successful project-based learning curriculum requires students to be intrinsically motivated and self-directed learners. Within a high school social studies classroom, students have extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation relies on direct teacher instruction and external rewards. In the short-term, this type of motivation can assist teachers in classroom management and lesson planning. However, in the long-term intrinsic motivations can better help social studies students increase their interest, enjoyment, and knowledge of the historical material (Deci & Ryan, 2000). With increased intrinsic motivation, the students can gain initiative in the classroom and become self-directed learners.

Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the three important features of SDT that help students develop intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). First, the students need to have a sense of autonomy, which stresses the importance of having choices within the curriculum. Competence requires the teacher to provide the students with a structured curriculum, purposeful learning assignments, and positive feedback. Finally,
relatedness enables the students to connect with the historical material and feel comfortable in the class (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These factors can increase students’ intrinsic motivation; and thus enable them to, “take interest in, deeply learn about, and gain mastery with respect to both their inner and outer worlds” and become self-directed learners and responsible citizens outside of the classroom (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

**Dialogic Theory**

To facilitate the sharing of cultural relationships, personal experiences, and historical viewpoints amongst the students, I applied dialogic theory to my students’ group investigations. The ZPD lets the students form a community of inquiry and interact with their classmates to create a new interpretation of the historical information (Moll, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2004). Since America’s public schools have a diverse student population, educators should acknowledge that students have differing cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and academic interests. The dialogic inquiry method allows teachers to create lesson plans that reflect their classroom’s diversity and maximize their students’ learning abilities (Wells, 2004). This dialogic component played a major role in the social studies PBL curriculum since the students worked in investigative groups to analyze the social studies material and develop their historical viewpoints.

**Critical Literacy Theory**

With the aim of teaching the students historical events with contemporary connections that can improve their communities, critical literacy theory was the third component of the *Taking Sides* project (Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010). In contrast to textbook reading that presents the students with fact-based information, using
historical documents allows them to become the experts and begin making their own observations and interpretations. In other words, I wanted my students to act like historians (Ogle et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2011; Svihla & Reeve, 2016). This investigative method aligns with critical literacy theory since the students are not memorizing key terms and figures, but instead analyzing the purpose, audience, point-of-view, and historical context of the documents (Beck, 2005; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Greene, 1978; Schiro, 2013; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). In addition to historical sources, I sought to use contemporary documents to help the students make historical connections to modern events (Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010). To increase the students’ interest and engagement, I wanted them to understand that their opinions and cultural backgrounds shape their perspectives of the historical material (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007; Svihla & Reeve, 2016).

**United States History PBL Curriculum**

A PBL social studies curriculum gives teachers an opportunity to cast aside the restrictions of a one-size-fits-all curriculum and embrace a student-centered instructional approach. The educational lessons gained from the historical perspectives and learning ideologies presented earlier helped me create the United States History PBL curriculum or *Taking Sides* project. While there are many different versions of project-based learning, the *Taking Sides* project features the key principles of an essential question, student inquiry, a student-centered product, and presentation (Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). I matched each of these project-based learning principles to a stage of the PBL curriculum: (1) classroom question, reflection, and understanding; (2) student and group investigations; (3) construction of an
argumentative essay; and (4) presentation of an historical viewpoint. All of these learning steps were designed to help the students improve their critical thinking skills, engagement levels, and responsibilities as citizens in their communities (Clark, 2018; Kafai & Resnick, 1995; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Schiro, 2013; Schmoker, 2011; Wells, 2004).

Related Research

The case studies presented in this section highlight the successes of project-based learning in math, science, and social studies classrooms. They show the positive results of a learner-centered ideology on students’ critical thinking skills and engagement. Moreover, they show the struggles many students and teachers face in adapting to a PBL curriculum. All of these classroom examples can be integrated into an effective United States History project-based learning curriculum.

Previous Research Studies

Papert (1980) published the first case study of project-based learning, which used the computer technology, turtle geometry and math land, to help students better understand their math equations. This case proved very successful with the students since it was learner-centered and gave the children a personal connection with the material. The students did not memorize mathematical equations and repeat answers. Instead, the students were able to take their knowledge and create their own program. Through this process of applying their knowledge and creating a new artifact, the students became more engaged in their learning experience and achieved a higher level of understanding in mathematics.

In another study, Wagh et al. (2016) analyzed the impacts of inquiry-based activities in high school science classrooms. The researchers had the science students use
a computational model and code programing to stimulate their knowledge and engagement. After conducting 11 video-recorded interviews, the researchers concluded that the students experienced an increase in their computational and conceptual engagement levels. This case study also noticed the teachers’ initial reluctance to fully engage in the program and their lack of technological skills. However, the teachers overcame all of these challenges and gave the students an enjoyable and meaningful learning experience.

In a third case study, Balemen and Keskin (2018) observed 48 science classrooms and measured the effectiveness of a PBL curriculum. All of the students involved in the research were high school students, enrolled in physics, chemistry, and biology classes. Within these classrooms, the teachers did not rely on direct instruction, but gave their students project-based learning activities. The researchers aided in the creation of the PBL activities since many of the teachers were new to the program and needed assistance in scaffolding the material. At the conclusion of their observations, the researchers reported an 86.6% increase in the students’ science test scores versus students receiving traditional instruction.

In the last case study I reviewed, Larmer (2018) chronicled the use of project-based learning in a Nashville, Tennessee social studies classroom, where sixth-grade students were learning about the Civil Rights Movement. The teacher brought relevance to the topic by having students read about John Lewis, an activist who participated with the Freedom Riders in the early 1960s. They also learned about other Civil Rights leaders and activist groups to create a virtual museum, which they presented to their Chamber of Commerce and other community leaders. This activity went beyond just creating a
PowerPoint, which can lack vision and creativity (Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Larmer, 2018; Schmoker, 2011). The students also participated in Socratic seminars to discuss the major obstacles and achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. Larmer (2018) highlighted the successes of project-based learning in a social studies classroom and the key features of a challenging question, inquiry, student choice, and presentation.

**Teacher Challenges and Solutions**

Even though project-based learning offers students a great opportunity to take ownership of their learning experiences, there are a handful of challenges with the curriculum, many of which center on the role of the teacher. Many teachers falsely assume their roles have been diminished and adopt a passive attitude toward the students. This inactive teacher leadership can lead to mismanagement of the classroom (Clark, 2018; Esquith, 2013; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Schmoker, 2011; Wagh et al., 2016). On the other hand, some teachers are unwilling to lessen their direct instruction and give students more responsibility in the classroom. This problem creates a new set of obstacles since the students are unable to take control of their learning experiences; therefore, the students may become disinterested in the material and not gain mastery of the new concepts (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Svhila & Reeve, 2016). In a project-based learning classroom, the teacher needs to provide the students a guiding hand and context for their problem-solving activities (Daniels & Steineke, 2004; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Fisher & Frey, 2013).

Teachers, who assume the appropriate role of an instructor in a PBL environment, still face the challenge of handling their students’ cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Clayson, 2018; Esquith, 2013; Griffin, 2015; Schmoker, 2011). Since
diverse groups of students are enrolled in social studies classrooms, teachers must understand that minority and impoverished students sometimes feel disengaged from the mainstream historical narrative (Comber & Nixon, 1999; Emdin, 2016; Esquith, 2013; Ogle et al., 2007). Unlike the traditional curriculum that does not encourage the students to express their individuality, this new social studies curriculum engages students, creating an imperative for teachers to understand their positionality so the project-based learning activities can reflect the students’ backgrounds and interests (Brinkley, 2015; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Greene, 1978; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2011; Strauss, 2017). For example, some students could falsely believe that the American Revolution was just fought by rich old white men. However, if teachers provide a variety of primary and secondary historical sources they could learn the roles Abigail Adams and Crispus Attucks played in the Sons and Daughters of Liberty (Brinkley, 2015). The instructor must give students a varied assortment of sources so the children can relate to the historical events (Ciardiello, 2004; Clark, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Ogle et al., 2007; Wineburg & Martin, 2004).

Another challenge for teachers interested in creating a learner-centered classroom is the use of new technologies that support PBL strategies. Since there is a surge of new technologies entering the mainstream, many teachers struggle to use technology in their classrooms. For instance, the average age of high school teachers is 44.5 years, which places them at a major disadvantage for learning new teenage technologies (Jones, 2015). However, many of these technological gaps can be abridged with professional development sessions (Jones, 2015). Teachers must provide students avenues of learning with technological resources during the investigative and writing phases of the PBL.
curriculum. These teaching strategies give students choices within the lesson plan and allow them to research contemporary views and approaches to social activism.

**Social Justice**

When President George W. Bush (2000) was campaigning for the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, he often referred to the, “the soft bigotry of low expectations” (p. 1). The counter to this argument is that the law created unrealistic expectations for public schools. This problematic thinking then demoralized students and teachers, especially in minority and impoverished communities (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Emdin, 2016; Greene, 2014; Griffin, 2015; Howard, 2014; Lopez, 2018; Strauss, 2017). In response to the new federal and state regulations, school districts throughout the United States created lesson plans that were adverse to learner-centered ideology and used the lowest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy of recall and memorization (Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018). With these terrible teaching methods, fewer students are equipped with the civics skills to positively influence their communities (Perdue, 2018). This has prevented fairness in the public school system because it has disproportionately affected rural, impoverished, and minority school districts (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Gilreath, 2020; Griffin, 2015; Howard, 2014).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of the literature review was to show the reader the benefits of a project-based learning curriculum on students’ critical thinking skills and engagement levels (Clark, 2018; Clayson, 2018; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; McConachie et al., 2006; Ogle et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2011). I began with an overview of progressivism and constructivism and showed the positive benefits of having
active learners in the classroom (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Dewey, 1938; Flinders & Thornton, 2017; Moll, 2014; Piaget, 1973; Schiro, 2013). I also presented a theoretical framework of self-determination theory, dialogic theory, and critical literacy theory, focused on giving the students intrinsic motivation and turning them into self-directed learners (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Moll, 2014; Schiro, 2013; Wells, 2004). I then outlined the PBL curriculum with the four stages of an inquiry question, student investigation, writing of an argumentative essay, and presenting the students’ viewpoints. Lastly, I reviewed several PBL case studies in mathematics, science, and social studies classrooms in which the students experienced more growth in their critical thinking skills and classroom engagement as compared to their peers in traditional classrooms (Balemen & Keskin, 2018; Jones, 2015; Larmer, 2018; Papert, 1980; Wagh et al., 2016). The United States History curriculum has a unique opportunity to convert the students into active learners and prepare them for their future civic duties in a democracy.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The action research format provided the best method for this phenomenological study of the effects of project-based learning and narrative inquiry into the participants’ engagement levels. My AP United States History classroom served as the research site and my 23 students as the participants (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014; Mertler & Harley, 2017). I used qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to observe, measure, and analyze the effects of the Taking Sides project on the participants. Beyond my own classroom, the conclusions I derived from this study can lead to emancipatory action research and provide future history teachers suggestions for improving their students’ critical thinking skills and interest in social studies (Kinsler, 2010). This chapter will describe the purpose of the study, action research design, project-based learning intervention, data collection methods, and the ethical considerations of the study.

Purpose of the Study

Teachers should convert the traditional social studies curriculum, with direct instructional methods, into a learner-centered curriculum with project-based learning activities to help the students increase their critical thinking skills and intrinsic motivational levels in the classroom (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Barbara et al., 1996; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer, 2018; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Slavin, 1994; Wilhelm, 2007). The social studies PBL curriculum or Taking Sides
assignment transforms the students from spectators to investigators of historical events through a series of problem-solving projects (Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007). Throughout the Taking Sides project, the students used their personal experiences, prior classroom knowledge, contemporary events, and critical literacy skills to develop new historical interpretations and enhance their critical thinking skills (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Olge et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Svihla & Reeve, 2016). It also gave them the flexibility to express their own cultural background, heritage, and personal viewpoints through the curriculum, so as to increase their engagement with the historical material (Beck, 2005; Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Ciardiello, 2004; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Greene, 1978; Griffin, 2015; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). The Taking Sides project equipped the students with the necessary skills to be active and productive citizens in the 21st century (Barbara et al., 1996; Ciardiello, 2004; Kokotaski et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Schmoker, 2011).

**Action Research Design**

Across the United States, social studies classrooms are plagued with instruction that uses the lowest rungs of Bloom’s Taxonomy and student engagement that only results from extrinsic motivation. A central purpose of this study was to use project-based learning to better understand this situation and improve my teaching methods, using my classroom as the research site and my AP United States History students as the participants. As the teacher-researcher, I provided the intervention, collected the data, analyzed the results, and provided guidance for other social studies teachers. All of these
characteristics are important features of an action research design (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014).

**Identifying the Problem**

There is overwhelming evidence from the academic community that standardized testing and classroom memorization tactics do not grow a students’ knowledge or improve their independent learning abilities (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; McConachie et al., 2006; Moll, 2014; Wells, 2004). In addition, numerous studies have shown students to dislike social studies courses and have dissatisfaction with their school experiences (Greene, 2014; Kenna & Russell, 2015; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018; Strauss, 2015). There is a connection between weak critical thinking skills and lack of student engagement in the classroom. In response, the PBL instructional method advocates for students to become the center of their learning experience by investigating historical events through a series of inquiry-based activities. These student-centered learning activities improve students’ critical literacy skills and motivation in the classroom (Jones, 2015; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Kokotsaki et al., 2016).

**Research Site**

I conducted my action research at Northwood High School (pseudonym) in a South Carolina school district. It is one of the largest schools in South Carolina with almost 4,000 students between the ninth and 12th grades. Unlike other areas within South Carolina, it is one of the wealthiest communities in the state. However, the high school has 20% of its student population living in poverty or receiving benefits from Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance
Program (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2019). Northwood High School (pseudonym) also outranked many other high schools in the state, receiving a rating of “Excellent” on their previous report card. The graduation rate is 93% with 83% of those diploma earners enrolled in a two- or four-year college or technical college (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). Another important characteristic is 55% of those seniors are eligible for the LIFE scholarship, which is based on their grade-point-average, SAT, or ACT scores, and class ranking. In the previous school year, 891 students took the United States history end-of-course exam, receiving an average score of 73%. Compared to the results of the school district, this is a higher percentage since the district student population of 2,724 test-takers received a 57% average on the assessment (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). Although these statistical characteristics may seem irrelevant, numerous variables affect a student’s preparedness for United States History and motivations within the classroom (Barbara et al., 1996; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; King & King, 2017). While analyzing the data and developing a conclusion with my theoretical framework, I considered all of these variables as influencers on the participants.

I conducted the study in an AP United States History classroom, which offered several unique characteristics. Unlike other social studies classes, the students enrolled in AP United States History have to take the EOCEP and College Board AP exam at the conclusion of the course. Thus, the Taking Sides project aligned with both South Carolina and College Board standards. The South Carolina standards that relate to the Taking Sides project primarily focus on fact-based information (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). On the other hand, the College Board standards encompass seven
major themes: (1) America and National Identify; (2) Politics and Power; (3) Work, Exchange, and Technology; (4) Culture and Society; (5) Migration and Settlement; (6) Geography and the Environment; and (7) America in the World (College Board, 2018). All of these themes were demonstrated in the Taking Sides assignment with historical documents and discussions in the communities of inquiry. Lastly, a major objective of both sets of standards is to prepare the students for citizenship in the 21st century. This theme does not apply to visas or voting applications, but instead refers to helping the participants understand differing viewpoints, construct new knowledge, and have accountability and responsibility, which are the universal principles of citizenship.

Participants

The Advanced Placement course was designed by the College Board to provide students an opportunity to gain college credit in high school. A majority of the students enrolled in the course are academically at the top of their grade level and preparing to transition to the college ranks. However, Northwood High School (pseudonym) has created a special provision to allow all students to register for the course, with their parent’s permission, regardless of their grade level or previous academic performances. As a result, a handful of the students enrolled in the class have never taken an Advanced Placement course. During this study, there were 23 students enrolled in my course, with 21 white, two African American, 15 female, and eight male students. Moreover, three of the participants received free or reduced price lunch (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). Even though the action research took place in one United States History classroom, it is reflective of the demographics in other Honors and AP United States History classrooms’ that teach almost 400 students with 85% white, 15% minority,
and 20% receiving governmental assistance statewide (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018).

**Role of the Teacher-Researcher**

Despite my study’s emphasis on student-centered instructional methods, I had a guiding presence in the implementation of the PBL curriculum, gathering and evaluating the data, and providing a reflection (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014). Because I was the classroom teacher and researcher, my positionality in the action research was one of an insider, using the study “to deepen my own reflection on practice toward problem solving and professional development, as well as a way to generate knowledge of practice from the inside out” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 38). As the researcher, I analyzed the students’ pre and post intervention assessments, took field notes, examined questionnaires, and conducted student interviews. The reflection process was the final step of the action research with the central objective to provide accurate data results to help future educators in shaping their lesson plans (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014). With the intention of preserving the integrity of the research, I will share my findings in Chapter 4 for future educators to examine and criticize. I also provide my own judgements on the positive and negative effects of the PBL curriculum. The information from this study can lead to emancipatory action research and provide future educators a blueprint for growing their students’ critical thinking skills and increasing intrinsic motivation (Kinsler, 2010).
Implementation of Project-Based Learning Curriculum

Gradual release of responsibility (GRR) methods have provided educators a blueprint for transferring the accountabilities of learning from the teacher to the student. The GRR framework is divided into teacher and student responsibilities, with the teacher giving the students focused and guided instruction. In other words, it is the teacher’s duties to “establish the purpose of the lesson” and “question, prompt, and cue students to facilitate their thinking about the topic” (Fisher & Frey, 2011, p. 2). Next, the students learn in collaborative groups, helping each other to complete the assigned tasks. To finish the GRR steps, the students work as independent learners and, “apply what they have learned individually” (Fisher & Frey, 2011, p. 2). This transfer of accountability and learning is a key component of the PBL curriculum because, “learning requires interaction. It is an action-oriented experience, not a passive one” that helps students improve their engagement in the classroom (Fisher & Frey, 2011, p. 4).

Another important element of the implementation of the Taking Sides project was the use of the academic controversy (AC) technique: an essential question helped students examine the historical content, without defining the historical topic (Jacobs, 2010). The students need to understand that the historical material is shaped by their opinions and cultural backgrounds (Jacobs, 2010; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007; Svhila & Reeve, 2016). This technique also helped me design the assignments for the group investigations, furthering arguments and discoveries of new viewpoints amongst the participants (Jacobs, 2010). Overall, the AC technique shows students that historical events and figures are not confined to their history textbooks, but can give them helpful solutions to current problems (Jacobs, 2010; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010;
McConachie et al., 2006; Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wiggins, 2007; Wineburg & Martin, 2004).

**Data Collection Methods**

I used mixed-methods approach to answer the following question: “How does a social studies curriculum that emphasizes project-based learning activities influence student critical thinking and engagement with the historical content?” Since the research question aimed to measure students’ critical thinking skills and intrinsic motivation a variety of measurements was appropriate (Creswell, 2014; Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014). I used pre and post intervention assessments, teacher observational notes, questionnaires, and student interviews.

**Pre and Post Intervention Assessments**

With the intention of measuring the students’ critical literacy skills, I used a pre and post intervention assessment during the action research period based on the College Board’s (2018) document-based questions which require students to write a coherent essay. To grade the assessments, I used the College Board rubric, which measures the critical literacy skills of analyzing evidence, interpretation, comparison, contextualization, synthesis, causation, patterns of continuity and change, periodization, and argumentation. I compared the results of the pre and post intervention assessments to determine how, if at all, the students’ critical literacy skills improved. I did not focus on the students’ final scores, but rather their rate of improvement since growth is the key to in-depth knowledge and learning (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Efron & Ravid, 2013; Jones; 2015; Moll, 2014; Schmoker, 2011). Although many factors can contribute to the students’ scores, this was a source of measurement in my action research because all
veteran teachers understand you cannot have a highly engaged classroom where the students do not learn the information (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Moll, 2014; Ogle et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2004).

**Teacher Observational Notes**

Throughout the action research process, I took detailed observational notes of the students’ interactions with the *Taking Sides* project. These field notes allowed for a realistic portrayal of the positive and negative impacts of the PBL curriculum since I recorded the students’ comments and behaviors as they naturally occurred (Creswell, 2014). The field notes were also critical for my role as the program’s facilitator. Even though I did not give the students traditional lectures, I played an important role in the GRR framework, helping the students transition between the different phases of the curriculum (Fisher & Frey, 2013). To assess my actions, I wrote an after-action report at the conclusion of each lesson, which helped me examine my areas of success and correct any mistakes for future lessons (Creswell, 2014). Another part of my teacher observational notes entailed recording the students’ enjoyment or loathing toward the historical content. I used tally sheets a non-biased mechanism to interpret the students’ behaviors. Such as the number of times, the students interrupted the lesson by using their cell phones. Student cell phone usage is a sign of disengagement with the classroom activities (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Mann & Robinson, 2009). All of these areas of notetaking helped me examine the self-determination theory components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
Student Questionnaires

The participants also completed a questionnaire, examining their general attitudes toward social studies before and after the intervention of the project-based learning activities. Since the participants’ interests are not always absolute, I decided to give them multiple responses to the questions, using the following Likert scale: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, or (5) Strongly Agree. Unlike the natural process of the teacher observational notes, the Likert scale in the student questionnaires added an element of triangulation to help better analyze the impacts of the Taking Sides project (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014).

The student questionnaire included five questions. As far as inspecting the students’ critical thinking skills, asked if their previous history courses “required more than simple memorization, recall of facts and basic concepts, to be successful.” Even though the research site was an AP United States History classroom, some of the participants had not taken a previous AP or Honors social studies course. It has been my teaching experience, and research shows, that some College Prep (CP) and Honors teachers do not change their teaching methods but instead modify their assessments (Ravitch, 2016; Schmoker, 2011; Spring, 2018). For example, a teacher may give their CP class a 25 multiple-choice question test and their Honors class a 50 multiple-choice question test. Moreover, not all of the AP teachers at the high school use project-based learning activities in their classrooms; some of the teachers rely only on PowerPoint lectures and multiple-choice tests. Asking the participants about their previous social studies courses, enabled me to better understand the students’ interactions and growth with the PBL curriculum.
To complete the GRR framework, students need to become independent learners and use the highest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013). As a result, I also asked the students if they “understand how to be a self-directed learner and feel accountable for [their] learning experience.” Lastly, for the students to continue learning about history and become self-directed learners, they need to have an interest in the material. The questionnaire asked the students if they truly enjoyed the social studies course and Taking Sides project. With self-determination theory being my lens of analysis, enjoyment was an important aim of my instructional curriculum using autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These five questions sought to capture the students’ critical thinking skills and engagement levels.

**Student Interviews**

With the intention of gaining a more profound understanding of the students’ responses to the Taking Sides project, I conducted interviews with the participants after the intervention (Mills, 2014). The 10 interview questions were open-ended, which allowed the students to express their own viewpoints on the significant areas of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). I recorded their answers and later compared their replies to develop trends of reactions to correct mistakes within the PBL curriculum and provide insights for other social studies teachers (Mills, 2014). A handful of questions asked students about their strengths and weaknesses as a learner and their favorite and least favorite parts of the Taking Sides assignment. Another set of questions asked the participants about the specific phases of the curriculum and their views towards independent research, group discussions, and essay writing. Analyzing the four steps of the curriculum enabled me to highlight the flaws within the system and
make improvements for future students. The last set of questions asked the students about their attitudes toward social studies and how they can apply the skills they learned in the course as lifelong learners and responsible citizens in their communities.

**Ethical Considerations**

An important ethical concern is protecting the students’ identities. Throughout the research process, I wanted the students to be honest with their classroom behaviors, questionnaire responses, and interview comments. The participants may not have given truthful interactions or answers if they believed their responses could have negative consequences. I also sought to protect the children’s identities to prevent distress or embarrassment for any negative comments in the action research findings. For that reason, I chose to use pseudonyms for the children in the study.

Another ethical concern was not wanting to narrow the PBL curriculum’s reading assignments and classroom discussions, which can present students with a false historical narrative. The research participants were a diverse group, and “students who come from minority populations may feel disengaged from a country’s history and politics” (Ogle et al., 2007). As the teacher-researcher, I provided the students with a variety of historical documents that have different perspectives and allowed the students to make their own observations and conclusions (Ogle et al., 2007). In addition, the students had the opportunity to conduct independent research and use outside sources in their argumentative essays.

**Conclusion**

The action research format provided the best system for analyzing the impacts of project-based learning on my high school students’ critical thinking skills and
engagement levels since I conducted the research in my classroom, used my AP students as the participants, and had an interest in refining my teaching abilities (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Mertler, 2014; Mertler & Harley, 2017). There is no standard definition of assessment of project-based learning so I used several different forms of data collection instruments: pre and post exams, field notes, questionnaires, and student interviews. In addition, gradual release methods and the academic controversy technique helped organize, collect, and analyze qualitative and quantitative measurements (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014). All of these systems were used in the intervention to give clarity to the findings and results into the participants’ critical thinking skills and classroom engagement.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The action research intervention consisted of a project-based learning curriculum or *Taking Sides* project, structured using the academic philosophies of progressivism and constructivism to transform the students into historians and self-directed learners (Clark, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2008; Dewey, 1938; Schiro, 2013; Piaget, 1973). The intervention took place over a 6-week period, using gradual release methods and the academic controversy technique, with the participants learning the historical legacies of the Gilded Age (Fisher & Frey, 2013; Jacobs, 2010). With the aim of measuring the impacts of the intervention, I used a mixed-methods approach of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to collect data in my high school AP social studies classroom. These methods included pre and post intervention assessments, field notes, questionnaires, and student interviews (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014). I analyzed this information with a theoretical framework based on self-determination theory, dialogic theory, and critical literacy theory. From these findings, I determined that overall, the participants’ critical thinking skills and engagement with the historical content increased.

**Introduction of the Participants**

During the 2019-2020 school year, I conducted this action research at Northwood High School (pseudonym) in an AP United States History classroom, with 23 participants. To gain a better insight into the students’ academic backgrounds, I had them
complete a questionnaire and pre assessment, prior to the intervention. The figures, tables, and summaries below present the results from those questionnaires and pretest scores, giving me a better understanding of the classroom environment and problem of practice.

![Bar Chart]

**Figure 4.1.** Students’ previous social studies learning experiences.

**Table 4.1.** *Descriptive Statistics for Memorization Methods in Social Studies*

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though many of the students had previously taken an AP social studies course, six of the participants responded that the teaching methods they experienced only used the bottom levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy (see Figure 4.1). However, 17 of the participants were enrolled in previous social studies classes that required; “more than simple memorization to be successful” (see Figure 4.1). With a mean score of 4.0 showing an “Agree” answer but a standard deviation score of 1.24, the results from this question
show a great disparity between the participants’ past academic experiences. For that reason, I interpreted this data as evidence of my problem of practice. Beyond my own classroom, many United States History students are not writing argumentative essays, presenting their historical viewpoints, or making connections with modern events (Armstrong, 2010; Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Clark, 2018; Clayson, 2018; Jones, 2015; Kafai & Resnick, 1995; Kokotaski et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010).

Another key component of the data collection process that supports the above interpretation are the participants’ poor pretest scores. At the beginning of the course, the students answered a College Board document-based question on the differences between the New England and Chesapeake colonies. The pre assessment scores presented in Figure 4.2 and Table 4.2 resulted from the College Board five-point rubric and measured the critical thinking skills of comparison, contextualization, synthesis, causation, patterns of continuity and change, periodization, and argumentation (College Board, 2019; South Carolina Department of Education, 2018).
The participants received a mean score of 1.74 with only 4 out of 23 students passing the exam (see Figure 4.2 & Table 4.2). The standard deviation of 0.86 confirms many of the students did not get a high score, with 19 students failing the test (see Figure 4.2 & Table 4.2). This information reinforces my initial description of my problem of practice. The students were unfamiliar with using the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, and “simple memorization” tactics, associated with recall-based multiple choice questions are not helpful in improving the students’ critical literacy skills (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Clark, 2018; Clayson, 2018; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). I assumed the participants had

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**Table 4.2. Student Performance on Document-Based Question Pre Assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Md</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 4.2. Students’ Pre Intervention Assessment Scores.**
become accustomed to these types of multiple-choice questions and were not prepared for writing argumentative essays.

![Figure 4.3](image_url)  
Figure 4.3. Attitudes and feelings toward social studies courses prior to intervention.

Table 4.3. *Statistics for Enjoyment toward Social Studies Prior to Intervention*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Md</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional/ Before</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I also asked the students about their feelings and attitudes toward their social studies courses. Prior to the project-based learning intervention a majority of the students did not have an enjoyable experience in their previous history classes with only 7 of the students expressing enjoyment with a mean score of 3.04 signifying a “Neutral” stance (see Figure 4.3 & Table 4.3). Once more, the results from this question also supported my hypothesis that high-stakes standardized assessments have changed the social studies curriculum to include less choice, historical interpretation, and creativity for the students,
leaving them disengaged, frustrated, and unlearned (Greene, 2014; Kozol, 1991; Ravitch, 2016; Strauss, 2017; Spring, 2018).

Figure 4.4. Students’ understanding of self-directed learning prior to intervention

Table 4.4. Descriptive Statistics for Self-Directed Learner Prior to Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Md</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An additional question asked the students if they were self-directed learners in their previous social studies courses. Even though 14 of the participants marked “Agree” or “Strongly Agree,” many of them I believe were motivated by extrinsic factors because there was not a correlation between the participants’ “enjoyed social studies” and “self-directed” answers (see Figure 4.3 & 4.4; Table 4.3 & 4.4). Since the students did not have interest in the historical material, they must have been motivated by controlled rewards (Comber & Nixon, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Soares & Wood, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007). Again, these results support my assumption regarding the problem of practice because
extrinsic motivations lead to short-term engagement, whereas the purpose of the *Taking Sides* project was to help the participants with their long-term engagement and convert them into active learners propelled by intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000b; Greene, 2014; Griffin, 2015; Howard, 2014; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018).

This classroom of participants afforded a unique environment to test the merits of project-based learning because the questionnaires and pre assessment results showed two distinct groups. Some students were unfamiliar with student-centered instructional methods and indifferent to social studies. Others had experiences as self-directed learners and strong feelings of enjoyment toward historical content. During the 6-week intervention, this second group of students would form the backbone of the curriculum and encourage the student-centered learning environment.

**Findings and Interpretation of the Study Results**

The four stages of the *Taking Sides* project were designed to help the students think like historians and become self-directed learners. In the PBL curriculum, the students were first given an essential question and historical overview with modern connections. Next, the participants divided into inquiry-based group investigations to analyze historical documents. Third, the students conducted independent research and wrote their argumentative essays with my feedback. Lastly, the students presented their historical viewpoints and debated the modern implications of their arguments. All of these stages were organized with the GRR blueprint of focused instruction, guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent learning (Fisher & Frey, 2013). My theoretical framework of self-determination theory also prompted me to provide the students autonomy and choices, competence and positive feedback, and relatedness in a
safe learning environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 1996; Reeve & Jang, 2006).

Furthermore, with the use of critical literacy theory and dialogic theory, the students were able to understand the connections between past and present events in a collaborative learning environment (Beck, 2005; Ciardiello, 2004; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Moll, 2014; Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2004). All of these stages, along with the GRR methods and theoretical framework, will be fully explained and illustrated in the following action research narrative.

**Focused Instruction**

An important feature of the GRR framework is to give the students focused instruction, so they understand the relevance of the lessons (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010). In my earlier teaching career whenever the students complained about the PowerPoint lectures, textbook reading assignments, and learning, “about bunch of old dead white guys,” I would blame the standards and curriculum guidelines. However, the root cause of these complaints was my failure to provide a purposeful learning context. Providing an essential question corrected this mistake, turning the curriculum into an investigation that gave the participants focused instruction and a meaningful learning experience (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Jones, 2015; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Wiggins, 2007).

**Essential Question and Purposeful Learning**

At the beginning of the Taking Sides project, I gave students the essential question, “Were the Nineteenth-Century Big Businessmen ‘Robber Barons’?”. This question guided the intervention, and also aligned with the fourth United States History state standard, “The student will demonstrate an understanding of the industrial
development and the consequence of that development on society and politics during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries” (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018). In addition, the essential question was open-ended and used the academic controversy technique, allowing the students to develop their own interpretations, whether they thought John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie were ‘Robber Barons’ who used hostile business tactics or ‘Titans of Industry’ who developed new technologies and improved the lifestyles of average Americans (Brinkley, 2015; Jacobs, 2010). Lastly, the question allowed the participants to analyze the merits of entrepreneurship and laissez-faire economics, which enabled them to make modern comparisons (Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wiggins, 2007).

While a majority of the students were enthused about the investigative style of the Taking Sides project, a handful of students were apprehensive of the changes in the curriculum. When I asked Connie about this reluctance, I received the following response: “I did not enjoy the initial teaching of the Taking Sides, as it was such a difference from years of previous learning.” Connie was accustomed to a teacher-directed curriculum. In her previous courses, she had listened to lectures, copied textbook definitions, and memorized the material (Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Kozol, 1991; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018). As an AP student, she had academic success with this type of direct instruction and, “did not enjoy” the shift to a progressive and constructivist classroom. As the Taking Sides project unfolded for the students, SDT helped Connie and the other reluctant participants gain confidence in the new teaching methods. As stated in the earlier chapters, the teacher does not take a passive role in the PBL curriculum, but is an active participant helping guide the students through the different stages of the learning
Problems with the Essential Question

Although the essential question was successful in converting the students into investigators of the Gilded Age, it did not foster a connection with modern companies and businesspersons. My intention was to create an essential question that was simple and easy to remember, but these efforts inadvertently created a question that lacked relevance. An important criterion for an essential question is the need to, “spark meaningful connections with prior learning and personal experiences” (Wiggins, 2007). In the action research, this error went unnoticed by the participants since the classroom discussions, group activities, and assignment rubrics made links with modern events. The students understood that the Taking Sides project was helping them to learn historical lessons from the Gilded Age that could improve their own lives and communities. Nevertheless, I should have made this connection between past and present events obvious in the essential question.

Guided Instruction

After giving the students the essential question, I provided guided instruction with a brief historical overview of the Gilded Age. Unlike my earlier PowerPoint lectures that conveyed information students needed to know for the test, in this new design I provided “teacher questions, prompts, and cues” to help facilitate the participants’ critical thinking skills (Fisher & Frey, 2011, p. 4). In this series of classroom discussions, I presented the stories of Andrew Carnegie’s steel corporation and John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil as parallels to Jeff Bezos’s Amazon and Bill Gates’s Microsoft (Beck, 2005; Brinkley,
To help the children provide meaningful contributions to these discussions, I had them read a chapter from Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, “Robber Barons and Rebels,” which featured the negatives of Big Business in the Gilded Age. For a different perspective, they also read a chapter from John Gordon’s *An Empire of Wealth: The Epic History of American Economic Power*, “Was There Ever Such a Business,” highlighting entrepreneurship and the positive benefits of new products in the Industrial Revolution. This historical overview reinforced the important principles of GRR and AC since the students did not view the material as a series of definitions in their notebooks, but regarded the topic as an historian trying to determine the meaningfulness of the Gilded Age (Fisher & Frey, 2013; Jacobs, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007; Wiggins, 2007).

**Modeling the Investigative Process**

In one of these classroom presentations, the students read Carnegie’s “The Gospel of Wealth,” discussed his philanthropic endeavors, and analyzed several political cartoons from *Puck* magazine. They also watched a video clip and learned about the activities of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The student comments below reflect their understanding of the similarities between the charitable actions of Carnegie and Gates. In other words, the students were making connections between past and present events (Beck, 2005; Ciardiello, 2004; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Greene, 1978; Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wineburg & Martin, 2004; Wood, 2010).
Figure 4.5. Andrew Carnegie’s “The Gospel of Wealth” Student Comments

When I asked the students about the essential question and historical overview, many of them gave favorable reviews. They enjoyed how these early stages of the *Taking Sides* project used many different types of resources, showed them the relevance of the
historical information, and provided them a meaningful learning experience (Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). Helen shared,

“My favorite part of the class was when you would take questions and encourage discussions about the topic [Gilded Age] we were on. I really felt like I got to see other points of view and reconsider some of my own, after hearing what you and others had to say about the topics [Andrew Carnegie and Bill Gates] we discussed in class. It was by far the most interesting part of the class, as I think the most important thing about studying history is considering what it all means and how it relevant to today.”

As Helen and the other participants learned about the philanthropy of Carnegie and Gates, the students discovered many of the colleges and universities they hoped to attend received large financial grants from these businesspersons (see Figure 4.5). From this learning experience, Helen underscored the importance of dialogic theory and critical literacy theory. In these classroom activities, she was able to participate in a community of helpfulness and have an enjoyable learning experience with her classmates sharing “I really felt like I got to see other points of view and reconsider some of my own.” She was also able to maintain a more interactive attitude in the classroom because she better understood “what it all means and how it [is] relevant to today” (Beck, 2005; Ciardiello, 2004; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Greene, 1978; Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wineburg & Martin, 2004).

**Developing Student Inquiries**

After the historical overview, the students developed subset questions to break down the central topic of ‘Robber Barons’ into more manageable areas for their group
research assignments. As the teacher-researcher, I was careful not to have an overbearing influence, but to allow the students to express their own interests in creating the subset questions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Reeve, 1996; Reeve & Jang, 2006). Although the students presented many different topics of inquiry, they agreed to three-subset questions: (1) “How did Big Businessmen treat their workers?” (2) “What impacts did Big Business have on the environment?” and (3) “How did Big Businessmen affect the political system?” These subset questions helped guide the students’ analysis of the historical documents and discussions with their group members.

Overall, the students enjoyed the independence of interpreting the central question, participating in the classroom discussions, and developing their own inquiries. When asked about how the PBL curriculum supported self-directed learning, Faith shared, “I was allowed to move at my own pace and I was able to make my own choices when it came to the project.” Georgia responded, “This class helps me to learn the way I want to.” As I mentioned in the description of my problem of practice, many United States History teachers compact all of the standards into unrealistic learning timelines and develop lesson plans with ‘teach to the test’ assignments (Kenna & Russell, 2015; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Ravitch, 2016; Schmoker, 2011; Spring, 2018). On the other hand, the Taking Sides project allowed Faith to have an enjoyable experience in the course because she could learn at her “own pace.” In this statement, she is referencing the competence component of the curriculum and the 6-week format of the research process. She also speaks to the autonomy of the curriculum when she mentions having her “own choices” when deciding how to construct her “project” or argumentative essay (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Georgia’s remark, “learn the way I want to,” is in reference to the
subset questions since she was able to concentrate her investigation of the Industrial Revolution into economic, environmental, or political areas of research. Competence and autonomy are important features of the self-determination theory because they help the participants increase their intrinsic motivations and become active learners (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Flinders & Thornton, 2017; Reeve, 1996; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Robinson & Aronica, 2015).

**Collaborative Learning**

In the next part of the *Taking Sides* project, the curriculum shifted to the student responsibilities, in which “you [the participants] do it together” (Fisher & Frey, 2008). In this collaborative learning environment, the students divided into groups of investigation and analyzed historical documents. Even though collaborative learning is highlighted in this part of the narrative, it is important to remember that the lessons featured all of the GRR methods. As the facilitator of the material, I continued to provide the students focused and guided instruction with historical documents, guided questions, and the organization of the investigative groups. For some of these assignments, I told the students to group themselves with likeminded classmates. In other cases, I asked them to find partners with opposing viewpoints. As a result, the groups often changed members, which provided the students differing insights and viewpoints (Fisher & Frey, 2011).

**Economic: “How did Big Businessmen treat their workers?”**

In this sample, the students most interested in learning about the treatment of workers, formed a group investigation to scrutinize Carnegie’s actions during the Homestead Strike. After watching a short documentary clip and reading differing accounts of the strike, the students’ discussion quickly turned to workers pay and safety
issues. I then presented them with a speech from Samuel Gompers, the leader of the
American Federation of Labor, who was an advocate for higher wages, fewer working
hours, and safer factory conditions (Brinkley, 2015). Some of the students had part-time
minimum wage jobs or experiences with a difficult employer. These students sided with
Gompers, labor unions, and the steel workers. On the other hand, some group members
supported Carnegie and were shocked at the strikers’ violence (see Figure 4.6). This
learner-centered approach to the group investigations encouraged empathy between the
students and their historical subjects, which further increased their interest in the material
(Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Clayson, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kafai & Resnick,
1995; Soares & Wood, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007).

Figure 4.6. Andrew Carnegie & Homestead Strike Student Comments
When I asked the students about their favorite part of the PBL curriculum, many of them made comments that illustrated the concept of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development and the collaborations they had with their classmates in the group investigations. In response to an interview question, about these collaborations and the shared knowledge they had gained from connecting their personal experiences with the historical material. Albert said, “I didn’t mind Taking Sides because we were allowed to have a voice and speak about topics [Homestead Strike] with critical thinking measures.” Similarly, Bernard shared, “The assignment helped me to further dive into subjects and gain a better understanding of these historical movements. Not only was I learning the material, but forming opinions about it as well.” Albert’s answer reinforces Dewey’s (1938) educational philosophy that children need to use their personal experiences, instead of direct instruction, to learn the information. Albert’s reference to his “voice” allowed him to use his prior experiences of working a low paying job to help shape his historical perspective on the importance of labor unions in the nineteenth century (see Figure 4.6). In Bernard’s case he showed his awareness that social studies is not just memorizing textbook terms, but a series of “opinions” he ascertained from his analysis of the historical record. Bernard’s viewpoint supports Piaget’s (1973) belief that students maximize their learning when they combine existing and new knowledge (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Jones, 2015; Kafai & Resnick, 1995). The findings from this classroom activity show the importance of progressivism and constructivism in converting the students’ extrinsic motivation into intrinsic enthusiasm (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000).
Social: “What impacts did Big Business have on the environment?”

When the students wanted to investigate the environmental impacts of the Industrial Revolution, I was initially nervous because of my lack of knowledge into this area of study. Nevertheless, I recognized that many of the students were concerned with climate change, and I gathered several different pieces of evidence to help the students learn more about the environmental history of the Gilded Age. One of the group investigations focused on the pollution of John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company; along with the company’s impacts on wildlife populations (see Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7. John D. Rockefeller & Standard Oil Student Comments
Students’ responses to this activity emphasize the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in creating a successful collaborative classroom environment. Isaac shared, “I like Taking Sides a lot. I found the articles to be really interesting and it was really cool to see other students’ opinions in the varying topics.” Jackie referred to Taking Sides as, “One of my favorite things we did throughout the entire school year. It was a great way to figure out what people believe in and what they do to support that belief.” In the group investigations, both Isaac and Jackie, had autonomy and were allowed to choose their group members and avenue of research into the environmental impacts of the Industrial Revolution (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, Isaac and Jackie showed more enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. As the facilitator, I also helped give them competence in the activity by saying, “That’s a great observation Isaac” or “That’s an interesting counterpoint Jackie.” This positive feedback further encouraged the students to participate in their group activities and research the central topic. Lastly, Isaac and Jackie had relatedness with their partners and felt comfortable sharing their viewpoints with their classmates, such as when Isaac found it “really cool to see other students’ opinions” and when Jackie mentioned “what people believe in and what they do to support that belief.” Some of the participants criticized Rockefeller for his pollution, while others praised him for lowering the price of kerosene (see Figure 4.7). The evidence from this sample shows a positive link between SDT and the students’ intrinsic motivation in the Taking Sides project.

Political: “How did Big Businessmen affect the political system?”

In another group assignment, the students most interested in learning about the political history of the Gilded Age analyzed several political cartoons from Puck
Each group member analyzed a political cartoon and presented their interpretations. They were also able to compare their historical cartoons to modern cartoons of political corruption (see Figure 4.8).
Critical literacy theory and dialogic theory were important components of the PBL curriculum since the students learned about the historical events with contemporary examples and were able to share their knowledge in a collaborative learning environment. When I asked about the group investigations, students highlighted important parts of the curriculum. Dean said, “Analyzing the documents for the Taking Sides and making up my own mind for the question was fun to do. The discussions were interesting as I got to see other views of the topic.” Ethel felt, “Yes, I feel the students guide the discussion very well in class.” Instead of listening to boring lectures and committing to memory pointless historical facts, Dean expressed enjoyment in learning history as a series of differing interpretations. Even though the students were all researching the same central question, Ethel recognized in her comment that the “students guided the discussion” since it was their interpretations of the political cartoons that directed the group’s deliberations. In all of the group inquires relevance and socialization were key factors in maintaining a highly motivated and engaged classroom of teenage students since they were able to interact with the historical material and their peers (King & King, 2017; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; McConachie et al., 2006; Wells, 2004).

**Struggles with Intrinsic Motivation**

Although the group investigations proved to be an overall success at increasing the students’ intrinsic engagement levels in the classroom, some of the students were still motivated by extrinsic factors. As the students analyzed documents and discussed differing interpretations with their classmates, I began to receive questions from the participants about their grades. The questions became so frequent from some of the students that I began to record them in my observational notes. For example, the students
would ask, “Do we need to turn in this assignment?” or “Is this going to be graded?” or “When are you going to update PowerSchool?” The students’ concerns about their grades reflect my failure as a facilitator in the competence aspect of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 1996; Reeve & Jang, 2006). Alternative ways of understanding the participants’ questions are, “Why are we doing this?” or “Does my opinion have merit?” or “How much time do I have to complete the assignment?” Essentially the students were asking for more structure to the group investigations and positive feedback on their performances (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Reeve, 1996; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Schmoker, 2011). In hindsight, I should have created more guidelines to ensure all the students understood the purpose of the inquiry-based activities.

**Problems with Collaborative Knowledge**

Another problem that arose in this phase of the PBL curriculum was the difficulty I experienced in maintaining productive and diverse communities of inquiry. During the action research, I placed the students in a variety of different groups so they would have the opportunity to interact with all of their classmates. However, I noted in my observational notes that some of the students tried to only gather with their friends. For example, when the students were divided into groups based on their opinions of Carnegie and the Homestead Strike, some students changed their views so they could be grouped with their friends. A key feature of Vygotsky’s ZPD is to present the learners with diverse perspectives, which was hindered by some of the students in their group selections (Moll, 2014; Wells, 2004). Again, this problem shows a setback in the SDT competence segment and my failure to give the participants enough positive feedback.
(Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 1996; Reeve & Jang, 2006). It also highlights a problem with relatedness since the participants were selecting groups with their friends, because they lacked confidence and wanted to be in a supportive environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As the facilitator, I should have been more aware of these students’ anxieties and provided them better-organized discussions and supportive comments.

**Independent Learning**

After completing the group investigations, the students worked independently and wrote an argumentative essay using their own “voice” and “opinions” to answer the essential question (Beck, 2005; Clark, 2018; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Greene, 1978; Jones, 2015; Kokotsaki et al., 2016). As a novice teacher, I was always hesitant to give my students independent assignments, because I thought they would waste time and not learn the information. Now I understand all of the GRR methods work together, and I still need to provide the students focused and guided instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2013). During this part of the curriculum, I was conferencing with the students, proofreading their essays, and providing positive feedback (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013). A vital step of the Taking Sides project was allowing the students time to independently research and write their essays so they could become active learners.

**Student Argumentative Essay Writing**

This part of the curriculum provided the students independent learning since they were able to explore new areas of inquiry and form their own interpretations of the historical events (Ciardiello, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). Unlike the previous stages of the Taking Sides project, the students were no longer
following my directions or analyzing my approved resources instead, they were finding their own historical evidence and answering the essential question (Fisher & Frey, 2013).

‘Robber Barons’

The 19th century big businessmen exploited their workers and subjected them to extremely unethical business practices. It is clear that these men are robber barons because they were willing to expend lives to make a profit which they would then use to further only themselves in society... The 19th century robber barons can be compared to several men today such as John Donahoe and Mark Parker, the CEOs of Nike. Nike’s CEOs have faced criticism and backlash for their use of child labor and sweatshops to produce their products.

‘Titans of Industry’

Despite the tough working conditions, nineteenth century businessmen increased the income of thousands of American families, and improved consumer experience, therefore making them the fathers of modern-day America... The birth of new industries and factory work provided jobs for thousands and increased the income for families all over the country. Furthermore, the consumer experience in America improved significantly with lower prices and higher availability of resources. The new era of industry paved the way for modern-day business such as Amazon, created by Jeff Bezos, and Microsoft, founded by Bill Gates.

*Figure 4.9. Students’ Thesis Statement/ Answering Essential Question*

When asked directly about the autonomy or choices within the *Taking Sides* project, Catherine responded, “I feel that I was encouraged some to consider things for myself and adopt my own perspective on events, so in that sense I owned my learning experience in that I had my own views on things.” Similarly, James shared, “I feel like I had ownership of my learning ability during this class because I knew it was my responsibility to get my work down.” Catherine was able to “adopt [her] own perspective on events,” and sided with the ‘Robber Barons’ perspective. She also showed her initiative in the research and writing process by comparing the dangerous working conditions of 19th century, factories to a modern company’s exploitation of child labor (see Figure 4.9). In contrast to Catherine’s opinion, James had a positive view of
Carnegie and Rockefeller, labelling them as the “fathers of modern-day America” (see Figure 4.9). He, too, showed his initiative in the project since he recognized it was his, “responsibility” to develop an opinion and support it with historical evidence. With this initiative, both students activated their intrinsic motivation, and therefore, “owned [their] learning experience.”

In writing, these essays the students were able to maximize their critical thinking skills since they were not simply copying definitions from their textbooks. Instead the students were investigating the historical record, assessing differing viewpoints, and writing an argumentative essay, so the participants completed the three highest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy analyze, evaluate, and create (Armstrong, 2010; Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Svihla & Reeve, 2016; Schmoker, 2011).

Figure 4.10. Student Writing Examples

When asked about the strengths of the Taking Sides project, many students cited a better understanding of the historical record and an improvement to their critical thinking skills.
Kennedy shared, “My strengths after this class after taking this class is recognizing the important material I need to know when I am faced with a load of information. Now I can narrow down important facts and figures which has made studying a lot easier since all the other information tags along with it as I review before an exam. In Kennedy’s reply, he proved competence and that he was analyzing and evaluating the historical information, “recognizing the important material” (Deci & Ryan, 2000). He was also able to show his own knowledge about the interconnectedness of the material, “all the other information tags along” (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Another student, Dakota, shared, “I have learned to become more self-reliant and use information I gain outside of class and use that to help me.” Dakota was able to use the critical literacy skills she had learned in the group investigations and ascertain “information… outside of class.” Instead of just focusing on textbook information, the critical literacy aspects of the PBL curriculum allowed Kennedy and Dakota to analyze the purpose, audience, point-of-view, and historical context of the documents (Schiro, 2013; Schmoker, 2011; Svhila & Reeve, 2016). By developing their own interpretations of the historical material, the participants increased their critical literacy skills (Beck, 2005; Ciardielo, 2004; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Greene, 1978; Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wineburg & Martin, 2004; Wiggins, 2007; Wood, 2010).

**Presentations of Historical Viewpoints**

In the final phase of the *Taking Sides* project, the participants presented their viewpoints and participated in a classroom debate. The students did not stand at a podium commanding their classmates to observe a PowerPoint, but instead sat in a circle with their essays and took turns presenting their ideas. Although the essential question did not
require a binary answer, the students basically divided into two groups with 16 of the participants labeling the 19th century businesspersons as ‘Robber Barons’ and only seven believing them to be ‘Titans of Industry’. As the instructor I sat outside of the circle, to avoid having an overbearing influence, but occasionally helped guide the discussions with questions such as, “What were the arguments for and against the essential question?” or “That’s a good point. Does anyone have a counterpoint?” or “Does anyone see any parallels to our society?” In these debates, the participants acted as historians by presenting their views, questioning their classmates, and applying their knowledge to real-world situations (Fisher & Frey, 2013; Soares & Wood, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Robber Barons’ Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These struggles of business versus workers still exist today. For example, many companies still pay their workers minimum wage, which isn’t enough for anyone to live off of. To make matters worse, employee safety is still ignored. In an Amazon warehouse in New York, many employees and former employee safety is still ignored. This all shows how over a century later, the big business people and the government still haven’t changed their ways. They still act like the ‘robber barons’ of the late nineteenth century by thinking of themselves before their employees, and becoming filthy rich through immoral means.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Titans of Industry’ Counterargument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>However, many of these workers were immigrants, who were desperate for a shot at the ‘American Dream’ and were willing to do anything to achieve it. It is important to keep in mind that these individuals were not forced to work in the factories, they had the power to leave. Furthermore, some workers turned to strikes, such as the Homestead Strike and the Pullman Strike.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Titans of Industry’ Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These ‘titans of industry’ greatly contributed to society as they improved everyday Americans’ access to consumer goods, provided jobs, and were philanthropists. Influenced by Rockefeller and Carnegie, Bill Gates is a modern tycoon... Gates built Microsoft after buying licensing rights from SCP and IBM and built economic power off of that. Microsoft has gone on to flourish in other hardware and software products like Xbox, Windows OS, Bing, and more.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘Robber Barons’ Counterargument

Although these companies brought many improvements to American society and people as well as stimulate the economy, their treatment of their workers and their monopolistic nature by going against capitalism and destroying competition using dirty business practices earns them the title of Robber Barons… Apple, a tech giant, sources their labor out of the U.S. to Asian countries, such as Vietnam or Thailand, where the labor is cheap and their workers are mistreated so that they can produce quickly.

Figure 4.11. Student Classroom Arguments

Unlike other debates in which participants make nasty comments to put down their opponents, the Taking Sides debate proved to be a self-motivating learning experience (see Figure 4.11). Students’ engagement and enjoyment with the classroom presentations are evident in Micah’s reference to “The open discussions and when you would present two sides of an argument and let us decide,” as well as how Jamie shared, “My favorite part of this class was being able to be a part of an environment where the teacher valued fun while learning. It made me excited to come to a class where the teacher was just as excited as I was.” Similar to autonomy and competence, relatedness is an important feature of self-determination theory that helps the participants become active and self-directed learners. Micah said his favorite part of the Taking Sides project was “the open discussions,” and Jamie recognized the “environment” as the source of the “fun while learning.” These classroom debates were effective and productive because for weeks the students had worked in collaborative groups and formed a sense of belonging and attachment with each other and the historical material (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 1996; Reeve & Jang, 2006). As a result, these debates were not about the students winning an argument but they were, “excited to come to a class,” that allowed them to share their views in a collaborative learning experience.
Another sign of the students’ engagement and intrinsic motivation with their classmates was the lack of cell-phone distributions. Previous studies have shown a connection between student disengagement in the classroom and distracting habits like cell-phone usage (Barnwell, 2016; Emdin, 2016; Esquith, 2013; Greene, 2014; Lopez, 2018). Therefore, I used tally sheets to track the students’ cell-phone use to better measure the participants’ engagement in the classroom.

![Observations of Student Cell-Phone Use](image)

**Figure 4.12.** Student cell-phone use in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Weekly Avg.</th>
<th>PBL Week 1</th>
<th>PBL Week 2</th>
<th>PBL Week 3</th>
<th>PBL Week 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBL</td>
<td>Daily Avg.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above information presented in Figure 4.12 and Table 4.5 was collected from observational notes I recorded prior to the PBL intervention and throughout the action research period. The data shows the students’ cell-phone use was at its highest prior to the implementation of the PBL curriculum with 25 incidents per week or five violations.
per class period (see Figure 4.12 & Table 4.5). Conversely, at the end of the research period the students’ cell-phone use saw a dramatic drop to just two occurrences in the final week of the curriculum (see Figure 4.12 & Table 4.5). This is further evidence that the Taking Sides collaborative learning environment, with group investigations, classroom discussions, and Socratic seminars motivated the participants.

**Lack of Participation and Social Anxiety**

Even though the presentations and classroom debates presented the students a safe and friendly environment in which to share their historical interpretations, some of the students shutdown and refused to participate in this part of the curriculum. When I asked the students about their anxiety and fears of public speaking Rose shared, “I hated the part where I had to talk. I was able to create an argument in my paper but talking about it was hard and talking in front of people, in general, was hard.” Similarly, Susan said, “I hated that [presentation]. I did my work and got to know the subject but I wasn’t comfortable talking in a room full of people. The writing was ok but the discussions were probably the worst part of the class.” Terry also commented on the presentations, explaining, “I felt they [presentation] didn’t help me learn at all and were pretty stressful.”

Both Rose and Susan, were able to complete their argumentative essays, but struggled with their presentations. As the facilitator of the curriculum, I was too focused on helping the students construct their arguments on paper and did not spend enough time helping them with their vocal arguments. This was a major blindside of the competence feature of the curriculum that must be corrected in future lessons so students can have a more successful experience (Deci & Ryan, 2000). If one purpose of the Taking Sides
project is to give students, confidence teachers need to help students with public speaking so they can have an enjoyable and not “stressful” experience (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Nash et al., 2016).

**Impacts of School Shutdown**

With the outbreak of the coronavirus in the United States, Northwood High School (pseudonym) transitioned to a virtual classroom environment. Because of the new online format, the school district mandated that teachers could not lower students’ grades. During this period, many of my coworkers complained about maintaining their students’ attendance, engagement, and completion of assignments. With many of the students motivated by extrinsic desires, the teachers no longer had any incentives in the classroom. On the other hand, the participants in the *Taking Sides* project had enhanced their intrinsic motivations and become active learners because they were genuinely interested in the historical material. They had also boosted their accountability and responsibility in the classroom, which made them better self-directed learners.

![Figure 4.13](image_url)  
**Figure 4.13.** Attitudes and feelings toward social studies courses.
After the project-based learning intervention, 19 of the students displayed enjoyment in the course with a mean score of 4.13 showing an “Agree” perspective (see Figure 4.13 & Table 4.6). The results from this student questionnaire show the Taking Sides project had a positive impact on the students’ enjoyment of, “learning about history and the various interpretations of past events.” With the school shutdown, the students were more likely to stay active in the learning process since they were intrinsically motivated in the historical content (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Parsons, 2018; Schmoker, 2011).

Although 14 of the participants identified as self-directed learners, prior to the intervention, their scores did not correlate to their enjoyment in social studies. Accordingly, I have assumed some of the students were extrinsically motivated (see Figure 4.3 & 4.4; Table 4.3 & 4.4). However, the results below match the students’ enjoyment in the course and therefore demonstrate the students were self-directed learners based on intrinsic motivation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Md</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional/ Before</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project-Based/ After</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6. Descriptive Statistics for Enjoyment toward Social Studies
Figure 4.14. Students’ understanding of self-directed learning.

Table 4.7. Descriptive Statistics for Self-Directed Learner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Md</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project-Based</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the completion of the Taking Sides project, the mean score increased to 4.30 or “Agree” with 22 of the students identifying themselves as a self-directed learner (see Figure 4.14 & Table 4.7). Again, with the school shutdown, the participants of the Taking Sides project were more likely to pursue their studies outside of the classroom because they were self-directed learners who were intrinsically motivated.

With the aim of measuring the impacts of the PBL curriculum on the students’ critical thinking skills, I used a pre and post assessment. At the beginning of the course, the students answered a College Board document-based question on the differences among the 13 British colonies. I compared the results from this pre assessment to the
scores of another College Board document-based question. When my high school was shut down because of the COVID-19 outbreak, I decided to alter my original data collection plan and use the College Board’s AP exam as the participants’ post assessment. Usually the AP United States History exam consists of multiple-choice questions, short and long essays, and a document-based question. Teachers are only able to see their students’ final scores, and for that reason, they do not know how their students performed on each individual part of the test. However, after the nationwide school shut downs the College Board changed their AP exam to include a single document-based question. This gave me the opportunity to compare two summative assessments taken by my participants with the posttest graded by a non-biased source, giving more validity to the final scores.

![Figure 4.15. Students Pre and Post Intervention Assessment Scores.](image)

Table 4.8. *Student Performance on Document-Based Question Pre and Post Assessment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Md</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project-Based</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Unlike the students’ pre intervention assessment, the College Board AP exam scores had a mean value of 3.65 and standard deviation of 1.11 (see Figure 4.15 & Table 4.8). The data from the above graph and chart demonstrates the overall improvement of the students’ critical literacy skills since 22 of the students passed their post assessment (see Figure 4.15 & Table 4.8).

Table 4.9.  *Student Performance Compared to South Carolina and Global Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>% Passing Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project-Based</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>5,723</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>472,707</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By using the AP exam as a post assessment, I was also able to compare my students’ results to those of other students in South Carolina and around the world. My students who used project-based learning activities had a mean score of 3.65 with 87% of them passing the assessment (see Table 4.9). On the other hand, South Carolina’s students only received a mean score of 2.83 with 59% receiving a passing result (see Table 4.9). The global scores gathered by College Board did not show better numbers, with a mean score of 2.82 and only 58.6% of the students passing the exam (see Table 4.9). Even though it is likely other students in South Carolina and globally used PBL instructional methods the results from the AP exam show positive effects of the intervention.

Even though the data demonstrate the positive influence a PBL curriculum can have in a social studies classroom, other outside variables could have influenced the
growth between the pre and post test scores. For example, Northwood High School (pseudonym) offers Honors and AP levels in all of their core social studies courses whereas many other high schools in South Carolina only have a handful of AP courses. Despite the fact, that many outside variables, not connected to the pedagogy, could account for the increase in the students’ critical literacy skills, the participants did have growth in their scores and performed better than their peers.

When I asked the students about the Taking Sides project and its usefulness in converting them into active learners, Mary shared, “I have struggled in an AP history class before, so I was able to try out different ways of studying and find the best that worked for me.” Napoleon said, “Yes, this class has taught me that not all information will be given to by your teacher you will have to go find it.” Unlike traditional lesson plans that have difficulty adapting to the virtual platform, project-based learning allows for flexibility within the lesson plans to account for individualized learning (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Ogle et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2011). Mary took advantage of this feature to “try out different ways of studying.” Napoleon recognized he would not be successful in the course as a passive student and decided to become proactive in his learning. My theoretical framework of SDT coupled with the GRR methods used in the PBL curriculum transferred responsibility to Mary and Napoleon. As independent and self-directed learners, they were able to increase their critical thinking skills since learning requires interaction (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; McConachie et al., 2006; Moll, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2001). Independent learning requires accountability and responsibility from the participants to self-regulate their learning and apply their knowledge (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013).
Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative data collected in this action research highlights the improvements the participants experienced in their intrinsic motivation and engagement levels. Even though the students were enrolled in an AP United States History course, they did not show overt positive attitudes or feelings towards social studies (see Figure 4.3 & Table 4.3). However, after the intervention, which encouraged autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the activities, they had a more enjoyable experience in a social studies classroom (see Figure 4.13 & Table 4.6). Other information collected from the students’ questionnaires, and analyzed with dialogic theory and critical literacy theory, showed a majority of the students using higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy in their previous social studies courses, yet they did not identify themselves as self-directed learners (see Figure 4.1 & Table 4.1; Figure 4.4 & Table 4.4). The responses from the interviews showed that a combination of affiliation with the historical information, ownership of their learning experience, collaborative knowledge, choice of interpretations, and purposeful learning helped to increase the students’ intrinsic motivation (see Figure 4.13, Table 4.6, Figure 4.14, Table 4.7, Figure 4.15 & Table 4.8). Regardless of the grade level or subject, these are important themes for all teachers to include in their classrooms.

My findings also showed the participants enhanced their critical thinking skills with significant growth between their pre and post assessments, and evident in the observation notes, questionnaires, and interviews (see Figure 4.15, Table 4.8 & Table 4.9). The PBL curriculum, with the analysis of the historical documents, assisted the students in developing their own interpretations of historical events, and thereby
construct their own knowledge (Beck, 2005; Ciardello, 2004; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). Moreover, the students were better able to transition to online learning after the school’s shutdown because the intervention, based on SDT and the GRR methods, helped them develop accountability and responsibility. The participants’ AP exam scores supports this assumption since the PBL students had an 87% pass rating while less than 60% of South Carolina and global students passed the exam (see Table 4.9). Although teachers can develop many different types of classroom activities that assist students’ with their critical thinking skills, the evidence from this action research supports the concepts of learning-by-making, accountability, and responsibility as central components in a successful lesson plan.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter, I have provided a series of reflections on the evidence gathered during my action research (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014). I have an overview of the study, highlighting the accomplishments and challenges the project-based learning curriculum presented to the participants. Even though the participants’ experienced problems with the competence component of the self-determination theory, exhibiting anxiety toward their grades and fears of socializing with their peers, the mixed-methods approach documented the positive impacts, the Taking Sides project had on the students’ critical thinking skills and engagement levels. I have also developed an action plan to present the positives of project-based learning to my social studies department, high school teachers, and community stakeholders. Lastly, I have underscored several areas of future research into project-based learning to help teachers in the recent pandemic, school shutdowns, and use of virtual learning.

Premise of the Study

Even though teachers and students have greater access to technology and historical documents than previous generations, they are not effectively using these resources in the classroom (Daniels & Steineke, 2004; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Jones, 2015; Schmoker, 2011). Instead, teachers are relying on recall and memorization tactics to achieve acceptable pass ratings on standardized assessments. Students have become
accustomed to these direct instructional methods and reluctant to take ownership of their learning experiences (Barbara et al., 1996; Darling-Hammond, 2008; Efron & Ravid, 2013; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018; Strauss, 2017).

Consequently, many social studies classrooms have become occupied with teachers unwilling to challenge their students and children loathing social studies because they are unable to understand the relevance of past events (Greene, 2014; Kenna & Russell, 2015; Ogle et al., 2007; Soares & Wood, 2010; Strauss, 2017).

Faced with this problem, I conducted action research in my high school AP United States History classroom with 23 participants. I have taught United States history for 10 years and with my earlier students, I struggled with classroom management, teaching the large amount of required historical content, and preparing the children for their standardized assessment. During this period of my career, I relied on teacher-centered instructional methods, and therefore was in a constant battle with my students over their lack of engagement in the classroom and grasp of the historical concepts (Emdin, 2016; Griffin, 2015; Howard, 2014; Kenna & Russell, 2015; Ravitch, 2016; Strauss, 2017). I designed this study to correct these past failures by using project-based learning and a student-centered approach in my social studies classroom.

**Overview of the Study**

The PBL curriculum presented the students with a series of problem-solving assignments they resolved in communities of inquiry (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Moll, 2014; Ogle et al., 2007; Svihla & Reeve, 2016; Wells, 2004). With a student-centered instructional approach that emphasized purposeful learning, collaborative knowledge, student ownership and choice, construction of new knowledge, and accountability and
responsibility, the participants experienced growth in their critical thinking skills and higher intrinsic motivation. However, some students were frustrated by the process and disliked the group activities (Kusurkar et al., 2011; Noels et al., 2002). In the communities of inquiry, the students were able to self-direct their investigations and create their own opinions, interpretations, and understandings of the historical material (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Beck, 2005; Comber & Nixon, 1999; King & King, 2017; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). Despite the fact that many students enjoyed these collaborative learning environments, a handful of the participants struggled with speaking with their classmates, especially when they had clashing views. With a majority of the participants increasing their critical thinking skills and engagement levels, there were some students consumed by social anxiety and solely focused on their grades or an extrinsic motivational factor (Clayson, 2018; Kusurkar et al., 2011; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Noels et al., 2002; Reisman, 2017).

Accomplishments

Instead of a standardized social studies curriculum with historical facts and dates for the students to memorize and regurgitate on multiple-choice tests, the participants in the PBL curriculum gathered into groups of investigation. This central feature of the PBL curriculum can help students get, “higher grades, learn at a deeper level, retain information longer… [and] acquire greater communication and teamwork skills” (Oakley, Brent, Felder & Elhajj, 2004, p. 9). According to the interview responses, a majority of the participants referenced the Taking Sides project when asked about their favorite activity in the course. When I shared these results with my colleagues one person
commented, “Well, they just like talking with their friends.” Socializing is a part of the collaborative learning environment, which help stimulate the students’ enjoyment and engagement in the investigative process since I helped encourage them to use their own “voice” and “opinions” in the classroom (Clark, 2018; Jacobs, 2010; Jones, 2015; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Ogle et al., 2007). The participants’ were able to share their personal experiences and make connections with the historical content (Dewey, 1938; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Moll, 2014; Piaget, 1973; Slavin, 1994; Wells, 2004). For example, instead of wondering, “What are we learning about in history?” the students in the new program were curious about “How does history impact my life?”

Another triumph of the PBL curriculum was the positive change to the classroom atmosphere. In my previous AP class, I have observed tension among the students who are vying for college credit and scholarship opportunities. With the Taking Sides project, this high-stakes atmosphere morphed into a pleasant collaborative learning environment. The students enjoyed working with their classmates as partners and not competitors, sharing their personal experiences and developing their own opinions and interpretations. The students also seemed more relaxed when learning about the historical material, realizing that one terrible test grade was not going to doom their future college prospects. My observational notes underscored this new atmosphere, showing less cellphone use and fewer classroom interruptions (Figure 4.5 & Table 4.5). The student interviews also recorded this change, with some describing the Taking Sides project as “fun.” Although the PBL curriculum assisted the students in reaching the highest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy and improving their critical literacy skills, a larger achievement of the new
program was helping the students have a bigger interest in learning about social studies (Baleman & Keskin, 2018; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Martelli & Watson, 2016; Schmoker, 2011; Svihla & Reeve, 2016).

**Challenges**

In a PBL curriculum centered on SDT and praxis of GGR, participants must have intrinsic motivation, which is, “associated with deep learning, better performance, and positive well-being in comparison to extrinsic motivation” (Kusurkar et al., 2011). While many of the students increased their intrinsic motivation with the analysis of historical documents, evaluation of their classmates’ opinions, and creation of argumentative essays, some of the students highlighted their extrinsic motivation with a constant worry about their grades. When I presented this problem to my mentor teacher he said, “Well, those students are just really good at school.” After further discussions and analysis, I realized these students have been programmed from their previous classes to rely on direct instruction, vocabulary worksheets, study guides, and recall questions (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Kusurkar et al., 2011; Martelli & Watson, 2016). They had internalized these actions and believed the completion of all of their homework and memorization of the textbook vocabulary would guarantee them success in the course. All of the students who complained received a high grade in the course and a passing score on the AP exam, yet because the *Taking Sides* project relied on student choice, they felt rudderless and fought back against what they perceived as teacher inaction. For example, some of these students would ask, “Is this correct?” and I would have to remind them the goal was to form their opinion and interpretation. Transitioning students into active learners requires
teachers to help the students move their focus from earning grades to enjoying the learning process.

During the course of the action research, the participants formed groups in a variety of ways to analyze and evaluate the historical documents. In my observational notes, I recorded several incidents in which the students tried to congregate only with their friends. To further complicate this problem, when grouped with classmates who opposed their views, some students shutdown and did not participate in the discussions. In their interviews, common criticisms of the Taking Sides project included their anxieties about public speaking. Similar to the students who relied on extrinsic motivation, these participants performed well on their written essays and AP exams, but they were content with being passive learners in the Socratic seminars. The students’ previous social studies courses had not taught them socialization skills nor the need to have active participation in the classroom. A study from The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development showed that with a teacher centric instructional format, 91% of elementary students in fifth grade were listening to direct teacher instruction or working on individual assignments (Pianta et al., 2007). These instructional methods, offering little to no engagement, have carried over into high school classrooms and can lead to loneliness and low motivation (Greene, 2014; Howard, 2014; Kozol, 1991; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018).

In classrooms throughout the United States, millions of students want to learn and perform well in their courses, but they have been equipped with the wrong academic tools. I have a strong sympathy for these students because when I was in high school I received good grades by simply following teacher directions, completing my homework,
and memorizing terms for my assessments. Not until I entered the college ranks was I challenged with the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Adapting to a new learning style was difficult, but I was successful with continued practice and help from wonderful educators. Moving forward educators need to help students understand that knowledge is not a checkbox of material but a collaborative learning experience (Daniels & Steineke, 2004; Oakley et al., 2004; Slavin, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2001).

**Action Plan**

My mixed-methods design enabled me to determine that a majority of the participants enhanced their intrinsic motivation in the classroom and increased their critical thinking skills (see Figure 4.6, Table 4.6, Table 4.7, Figure 4.7, Table 4.8, Figure 4.8 & Table 4.9). In the previous chapter, the findings and results showed positive developments amongst the students because of focused instruction, guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent learning (Fisher & Frey, 2013). These key stages of the GRR method, along with the theoretical framework of self-determination theory, dialogic theory, and critical literacy theory helped me develop a school-wide action plan that will enable administrators and teachers to create project-based learning activities and transform students into self-directed learners (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Parsons, 2018; Perkins, 2019; Robinson & Aronica, 2015).

In the course of my career, I have taught at three different school districts and high schools. I have attended numerous professional development (PD) sessions and experienced at least three school overhauls that advocated for a student-centered instructional method in the classroom. Many of the PD courses and all of the school transformations failed because they advocated for change in a top-down approach and
“Many teachers indicate that their backgrounds, experience levels, or learning needs are not considered in the planning or design of their professional learning” (Kampen, 2019). In these examples, the school district and administrators directed the teachers without their input or support. As a result, the projects failed because many of the teachers ignored the instructions in the PD sessions and snubbed the administrative directives (Kampen, 2019; Lieberman, 2016; Schmoker, 2012).

The following action plan reflects my experiences with these failures and attempts to change my high school from the bottom to the top. The SMART goal system, used in all of the stages of the plan, ensures goals are “Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely” (Kampen, 2019). With these objectives, the action plan will progress from the social studies department to a school-wide program. The first steps of the plan are within the social studies department, with teacher and student input, and then the PBL curriculum can grow into the other academic areas. Bubb and Earley (2009) listed important objectives for a successful school program, emphasizing, “the leadership and management of staff development needs to be effective” (p. 25). This design acknowledges my position as a leader in the United States History professional learning community. I have more power and accessibility to help foster change with those teachers and students. Even if the other areas of the action plan are ineffective, the high school will at least have a nucleus of classrooms using the PBL curriculum and encouraging self-directed learners.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of Plan</th>
<th>Recommended Action</th>
<th>Staff Responsible for Implementation</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Required Resources</th>
<th>Measurement of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Learning Community (PLC) United States History</strong></td>
<td>Community of Practice &amp; Inquiry for US History Teachers</td>
<td>United States History Teachers</td>
<td>Quarter One (9 Weeks)</td>
<td>Lesson Plans for Student-Centered Learning in US History</td>
<td>Qualitative Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Learning Community (PLC) Social Studies Department</strong></td>
<td>Community of Practice &amp; Inquiry for Social Studies Teachers</td>
<td>Social Studies Administrator &amp; Teachers</td>
<td>Quarter Two (9 Weeks)</td>
<td>Lesson Plans for Student-Centered Learning in Social Studies Classroom</td>
<td>Qualitative &amp; Quantitative (EOCEP) Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Learning Community (PLC) Department Level</strong></td>
<td>Professional Development for Classroom Teachers</td>
<td>Department Administrators &amp; Teachers</td>
<td>Quarter Three (9 Weeks)</td>
<td>Academic Resources, Guidelines &amp; Rubrics</td>
<td>Qualitative Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Learning Community (PLC) School Wide</strong></td>
<td>Community of Practice &amp; Inquiry for All Teachers</td>
<td>School Wide Administrators &amp; Teachers</td>
<td>Quarter Four (9 Weeks)</td>
<td>Lesson Plans for Student-Centered Learning in All Classrooms</td>
<td>Qualitative &amp; Quantitative (EOCEP) Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Justice &amp; Community Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Classroom Diversity &amp; Outreach with Stakeholders</td>
<td>School Wide Administrators &amp; Teachers</td>
<td>Throughout School Year</td>
<td>Promotion Outreach &amp; Community Events</td>
<td>Qualitative &amp; Quantitative Methods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the first stage of the action plan, the United States History PLC will follow Vygotsky’s teachings and form a community of practice and inquiry centered on the PBL curriculum (Bowe & Gore, 2016; Eun, 2011; Schmoker, 2012). Since I am a leader of the professional learning community, I can easily share with my colleagues the positives and negatives of the project-based learning activities. I recognize that I do not have a monopoly on all of the good ideas and strategies, and this stage will allow other U.S. History teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of my lesson plans. From these critiques, the other U.S. History teachers will be tasked with creating their own lesson plans to use in their classrooms (Bubb & Earley, 2009; Lieberman, 2016; Schmoker, 2012). Although all of the teachers involved in this process are teaching the same historical content, their lesson plans will reflect the level of their course: College Prep, Honors, or Advanced Placement. For example, in my AP course I presented my students with unaltered primary sources, whereas in a CP class the students would receive modified documents. A key component of successful professional development is getting teachers invested in the learning process by encouraging them to “collaboratively brainstorm with colleagues” or “share their successes and challenges” (Kampen, 2019). This stage of the action plan encourages teacher ownership with the creation of sample lesson plans and evaluation of their effectiveness in a professional learning community. Over a 9-week period, qualitative teacher observations and student interviews will measure the usefulness of the United States History PBL curriculum.

In the second phase of the action plan, the U.S. History teachers and social studies administrator will create a new community of practice and inquiry with the entire department (Bowe & Gore, 2016; Eun, 2011; Lieberman, 2016; Schmoker, 2012). Even
though my action research gathered data from only 23 participants, when the PBL curriculum is presented to the social studies department it will have more legitimacy due to hundreds of participants. The teachers will divide into their subject areas of Geography, World History, Economics, and Government, with the U.S. History teachers as mentors, assisting their colleagues in creating sample lesson plans with student-centered instructional approaches. All of the teachers will participate in regular observations of other social studies classrooms and provide feedback (Kampen, 2019). Mentorship, observations, and embedding the PBL curriculum into the teaching process will foster more teacher investment and ownership (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Kampen, 2019). This stage will conclude the first semester, a quantitative measurement of the students’ end-of-course scores will also be used in the evaluation of the program.

The third stage of the action plan branches the PBL curriculum into the other subject areas of math, science, and English. The main players in this part of the plan will be the social studies department, administrators, and chairpersons of the other subject areas, who will create professional development sessions for the entire faculty. According to a survey of classroom teachers, “more than 1,300 North Carolina teachers showed that 85 percent… felt they lacked the skills and knowledge to use digital tools well and adopt personalized learning practice in their classrooms” (Perdue, 2018). To prevent this type of confusion these sessions will provide teachers with academic resources, guidelines, and rubrics to help them with the transition into a project-based learning environment.

The fourth phase of the action plan enacts a school-wide application of project-based learning activities that foster choice and student ownership. All of the teachers will
work together, within their departments, to share practices, develop new lesson plans, and observe instructional methods. The administrators will also observe classrooms and pair new and veteran teachers in a mentorship program that will ensure a smooth changeover into the new program (Kampen, 2019; Perkins, 2019). At this point in the action plan, the administrative and teacher leadership will have developed a firm understanding of the PBL curriculum, established goals and best practices, and created evaluation systems all of which will ensure the successful implementation of the new program (Parsons, 2018; Perdue, 2018; Perkins, 2019; Kampen, 2019).

Throughout the action plan administrators and teachers will work together to ensure social justice and community engagement (Bowe & Gore, 2016; Bubb & Earley, 2009; Fullan, 2020; Schmoker, 2012). The AP United States history course selected for the action research was reflective of the high school’s AP Academy with less than 10% of minority student enrollment. Teachers and administrators must work together to encourage minority students to take more Honors and Advanced Placement courses. During the students’ lunch breaks; all of the AP Academy teachers will participate in a promotional outreach program in the school’s library to increase minority student participation. Administrators will also work with the guidance counselors to better identify minority students for advancement in higher-level courses. Community events will be planned to help students make connections with stakeholders and charitable organizations for future social justice projects (Parsons, 2018). All of these initiatives are paramount for the students to have a diverse academic experience and become lifelong learners in an ever-changing society.
Suggestions for Future Research

Since my action research only consisted of 23 participants in an AP United States History course, the sample size is too small to apply my findings to widespread social studies classrooms. I would encourage more social studies teachers to use project-based learning techniques in their classrooms and record their results to help grow the database of knowledge. Other areas of research could be into the difficulties I experienced with the students’ concerns over their grades, anxiety with group assignments and public speaking, and the technical troubles with virtual learning. Researchers could provide answers to these troubles and give a better learning experience to future students.

In a project-based learning classroom, intrinsic motivation is an essential component since it leads to more long-term successes and helps the students develop a stronger understanding of the material (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Larmer, 2018; Kusurkar et al., 2011). While many of the students increased their intrinsic motivation with the analysis of historical documents, evaluation of their classmates’ opinions, and creation of argumentative essays, some of the students highlighted their extrinsic motivation with a constant worry about their grades. These students also favored defining key terms and answering multiple-choice questions, instead of participating in classroom discussions and writing argumentative essays. These signs led me to conclude that some of the students were only concerned about their grades and not constructing new knowledge. Future research in this area could create new strategies to help teachers increase their students’ interest in the classroom and become self-directed learners.
In addition, schools would benefit from more research into the effects of the instructor’s dispositions in the classroom environment and students’ engagement levels (Noels et al., 2002). For example, were the participants in my classroom more interested in my management style or the new insights into historical interpretation? Unlike classrooms that rely on direct instruction, the PBL curriculum emphasizes a student-centered approach that requires the children to take ownership of their learning experience (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Harvey & Goudvis, 2005; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). Without an interest in the historical content and high levels of intrinsic motivation, the students will depend upon the teacher for direction. More studies could illustrate the various traits teachers could use in the classroom to help foster intrinsic motivation and engagement.

Additional research could also help teachers improve classroom-grouping strategies, to create a more comfortable learning environment for the children. Similarly, public speaking is another area that needs more research to better equip teachers to ease students’ discomfort (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Nash et al., 2016; Noels et al., 2002; Schmoker, 2011; Wells, 2001). In a couple of the interviews, the students expressed their anxiety in presenting their argumentative essays and viewpoints to the entire classroom. These students shutdown and did not participate in this part of the PBL curriculum. More research needs to be conducted in English, math, science, and social studies classrooms to present the students with better public speaking forums that foster partnership, openness, and creativity.

The effects of the nationwide school closures on students’ emotional and mental health also warrants more research. Prior to my school’s shutdown, I had already created
an online platform for my students, which enabled them to have an easier transition into the new learning environment. We also conducted online collaborative video sessions. Even though the students were able to complete their projects and performed well on the College Board AP exam, recent studies demonstrate many students experienced negative consequences because of the school closures. America’s Promise Alliance conducted a survey of 3,300 teenagers and showed 52% were nervous about their health, 39% had anxiety about their grades, and 25% felt isolated from their friends and communities (Prothero, 2020). These percentages are greater with students living in impoverished households and suffering from mental health problems (Preston, 2020). With virus outbreaks and environmental disasters, future school closures are inevitable, which necessitates research into virtual learning platforms that support students’ emotional needs and safeguard against mental health issues.

**Conclusion**

I have been a public school teacher for over a decade and whenever I meet a new person, the conversation naturally turns to work and they ask, “What do you do for a living?” When I tell them I am a schoolteacher, I usually get this dumbfounded expression and they ask, “Why?” I typically escape with the joke, “The three best things about teaching are June, July, and August,” which avoids an awkward moment because the real answer is very personal and complex. The truthful answer is my father is an Anglican priest and growing up in ministry I always wanted to have a meaningful profession that was helpful to others. He was also a history buff and took me to numerous battlefields, museums, and historical sites giving me a lifelong interest in social studies. Lastly, his ministry required our family to move throughout the country. Kind and
supportive teachers, who made these transitions easier, gave me an early fondness for the profession. Sadly, many people do not understand the teaching profession because regimented curriculums and high-stakes tests have given the public a false understanding and disdain for public education (Kenna & Russell, 2015; Kozol, 2005; Ravitch, 2016; Strauss, 2017). Many falsely believe the system is hopelessly problematic, when in truth public education is a mission field occupied by wonderful teachers trying to help children achieve their full potential.

My first year of teaching United States History, at Scott’s Branch High School in Clarendon School District One, was a failure because I restricted myself to using only direct instructional methods and teaching to the standardized test. My students did not improve their critical thinking skills and became uninterested in my history lessons. This teaching failure was my first clue into the importance of relatedness and ownership in a social studies curriculum. As I progressed through my teaching career, I was able to teach every course in the social studies curriculum and all levels (College Prep, Honors, and Advanced Placement) of United States History. In these courses, I created PowerPoints to provide purposeful learning, examples of real-world situations, and choices of assignments. All of these features led to positive impacts in the classroom, but I was still reluctant to use a student-centered instructional approach. After years of building up confidence from my teaching experiences, conversations with mentors, and independent research, I finally felt comfortable in transforming my classroom into a project-based learning environment.

This action research took place in my AP United States History classroom and measured the impacts of project-based learning on the critical thinking skills and
engagement levels of my students. In the planning stage, I built the PBL curriculum using self-determination theory, with its emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014). With this umbrella theory, my theoretical framework branched into progressivism, constructivism, self-determination theory, dialogic theory, and critical literacy theory (Boytchev, 2015; Clark, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Moll, 2014; Schiro, 2013; Wells, 2004). All of these pedagogies informed the four-part Taking Sides project: (1) inquiry question and overview of the historical material, (2) independent and group investigation, (3) construction of an argumentative essay, and (4) presentation of differing viewpoints. The PBL curriculum also changed my classroom teacher role into a facilitator of the learning experience, organizing the student collaborative groups, providing historical documents, and guiding the discussions (Fisher & Frey, 2013; Jones, 2015; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010).

In the acting stage of the action research, the students followed the four parts of the PBL curriculum and I collected quantitative and qualitative data (Mertler, 2014). The students were able to construct new knowledge; and thereby improve their critical thinking skills. These positive developments were recorded in a pre and post assessment (see Figure 4.1; Table 4.1 & Table 4.2). The participants in the PBL curriculum also received higher scores on the College Board AP exam than other United States History students throughout the state and nation (see Table 4.2). With the observational notes, questionnaires, and student interviews, I was able to ascertain an increase in the students’ engagement levels and intrinsic motivation toward the historical content (see Figure 4.3; Table 4.3; Figure 4.4 & Table 4.4). However, many challenges arose during the action
research period, with some students solely focused on the extrinsic motivation of grades, problems with forming the communities of inquiry, and students’ anxieties about public speaking. The school shutdown also disrupted the learning environment and presented new opportunities and complications for the students to maintain their accountability and responsibility to their learning experiences. Overall, the action research was successful and warrants further use in classrooms and research into best practices.

The development stage of the action research allowed me to create an action plan for further exploration of project-based learning at my high school (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Mertler, 2014). The plan has four parts and attempts to expand the United States PLC into a school-wide learning community with administrators and teachers working together to create a student-centered learning environment. The principles of project-based learning are not limited to social studies, but can be used in English, math, and science classrooms to help turn students into self-directed learners. The action plan also contained a social justice and community engagement section to increase the diversity of the school’s upper level courses and gather support from the school’s stakeholders.

When I first began my doctorate program at the University of South Carolina my intention was to use my degree to become an administrator or social studies coordinator. Upon reflection on the action research study, I believe my skills as a classroom teacher have greatly improved, moving my abilities from the minor leagues to major league. The Taking Sides assignment and the principles of project-based learning have reenergized my desire to stay in the social studies classroom. Now when a person asks about my profession I tell them, “I am a teacher action-researcher,” and explain how I am
dissatisfied with the current state of public education but I am trying to fix the problems by making my students lifelong learners and productive citizens.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

AP UNITED STATES HISTORY DESCRIPTION

Course Description: Advanced Placement United States History (APUSH) is a college level introductory survey course that covers the spectrum of American history from the pre-Columbia era to the present. Successful completion of this yearlong course is equivocal to two United States history courses or six hours of college credit. Using chronological and thematic approaches to the material, the course exposes students to extensive primary and secondary sources and to the interpretations of various historians. The course examines the nation’s political, diplomatic, cultural, social, environmental, and economic history and challenges student’s prior knowledge of the past. In addition to exposing students to the historical content, an AP course also trains students to analyze and interpret primary sources, including documentary material, maps, statistical tables, and pictorial and graphic evidence of historical events. Students should have a sense of awareness of multiple interpretations of historical issues, multiple causations and change over time, and should be able to compare developments or trends from one period to another. While this course will prove to be an academic challenge, it will also be highly rewarding for those who engage. (College Board, 2020)

Thematic Learning Objectives in APUSH: While the course follows a narrative structure supported by the curriculum guidelines, the following seven themes described in the APUSH course and exam description are placed in every Taking Sides unit:

1. Identify: How has the American national identity changed over time?
2. Work, Exchange, and Technology: How have changes in the markets, transportation, and technology affected American society?
3. Peopling: How have changes in migration and population patterns affected American life?
4. Politics and Power: How have various groups sought to change the state and federal government’s role in American political, social, and economic life?
5. America in the World: How has US involvement in global conflicts set the stage for domestic social change?
6. Environment and Geography: How did the institution and values between the environment and Americans shape various groups in North America?
7. Ideas, Beliefs, and Culture: How have changes in moral, philosophical, and cultural values affected US history? (College Board, 2020)
Historical Comprehension Skills: The following skills reflect the accomplishments of an historian.

1. *Chronological Reasoning:* Creating arguments with historical causation, patterns of continuity and change over time, with a focus on periodization.

2. *Comparison and Contextualization:* Comparison and contextualization of historical events.

3. *Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence:* Developing an essay with historical argumentation and appropriate use of historical evidence.

*Historical Interpretation and Synthesis:* Providing an argument with a unique interpretation and synthesis. (College Board, 2020)
APPENDIX B

TAKING SIDES PROJECT

Title: Taking Sides Project, Robber Barons vs. Titans of Industry

Essential Question: Were the Nineteenth-Century Big Businessmen ‘Robber Barons’?

Topic: Standard 4, Indicators 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5

- Standard 4: The student will demonstrate an understanding of the industrial development and the consequence of that development on society and politics during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.
- Indicator 4.1: Summarize the impact that government policy and the construction of the transcontinental railroads had on the development of the national market and on the culture of Native American peoples.
- Indicator 4.2: Analyze the factors that influenced the economic growth of the United States.
- Indicator 4.3: Evaluate the role of capitalism and its impact on democracy.
- Indicator 4.4: Explain the impact of industrial growth and business cycles on farmers, workers, immigrants and labor unions.
- Indicator 4.5: Explain the causes and effects of urbanization in the late 19th century America.

Phase One: Classroom Question, Reflection, and Understanding

Description: I will present the students with an essential question that has practical applications. Next, I will give the students an historical overview of the material. The students will also develop subset questions to better guide their group investigations.

Essential Question: Were the Nineteenth-Century Big Businessmen ‘Robber Barons’?

Student Subset Questions:
- How did Big Businessmen treat their workers?
- What impacts did Big Business have on the environment?
- How did Big Businessmen affect the political system?

Sample of Historical Documents:
• PBS American Experience: The Gilded Age
• PBS Frontline: Amazon Empire: The Rise and Reign of Jeff Bezos

Phase Two: Student and Group Investigations

Description: I will provide the students with historical primary and secondary sources to help them on their historical investigations. The students will rotate into different groups of investigation.

Sample of Historical Documents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Question</th>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Political</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were the Nineteenth-Century Big Businessmen ‘Robber Barons’?</td>
<td>How did Big Businessmen treat their workers?</td>
<td>What impacts did Big Business have on the environment?</td>
<td>How did Big Businessmen affect the political system?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNBC Documentaries Carnegie, Rockefeller &amp; Morgan</td>
<td></td>
<td>David Wells, Recent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Question</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were the Nineteenth-Century Big Businessmen ‘Robber Barons’?</td>
<td>How did Big Businessmen treat their workers?</td>
<td>What impacts did Big Business have on the environment?</td>
<td>How did Big Businessmen affect the political system?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Madrick, from <em>The Case for Big Government</em>, 2008</td>
<td>Democratic Staff of the House Committee on</td>
<td>Christopher Essex &amp; Ross McKitrick, from <em>Taken by Storm: The Trouble Science, Policy, and Politics of</em></td>
<td>Robert Almeder, from “Morality in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim DeMint, from <em>Saving Freedom</em>, 2009</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phase Three: Construction of an Argumentative Essay

Description: The students will have an opportunity to use online databases to conduct their independent research. I will provide the students a guiding hand through the researching and writing process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taking Sides/Argumentative Essay Rubric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Paragraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Historical Background of the Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Section #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Summation of Argument, Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Examples and Quotes from Sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Section #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Summation of Argument, No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phase Four: Presentation of Historical Viewpoints

Description: The students will present their findings and relate the historical examples to contemporary events. The students will also participate in a Socratic seminar and classroom debate. I will help guide the discussions with inquiry questions.

Taking Sides, Clashing Views in United States History, Volume 2: Reconstruction to the Present, Larry Madaras & James SoRelle

Critical Thinking and Reflection Questions:
- Howard Zinn has been called a Marxist historian. What does this mean?
- How does Zinn’s interpretation of the political and economic dynamics of nineteenth-century America fit a Marxist interpretation?
- What is a “robber baron”? Describe and critically analyze Zinn’s description of the monopolistic practices of the American businessmen John D. Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie. Critically analyze how Zinn argues that the political system, religion, and education supported the monopolistic practices of the business elite.
- Define vertical integration. Define horizontal integration. Explain how Rockefeller vertically integrated the oil industry. Explain how Carnegie integrated the steel industry.
- What is more important in a successful business, organization or entrepreneurship? Critically discuss, using Rockefeller and Carnegie as examples.
- Compare and contrast and critically evaluate the interpretations of Zinn and Gordon toward the nineteenth-century men of big business. Were they “robber barons” or “industrial statesmen”?
- Is it possible to reconcile the two viewpoints? Does Zinn provide enough evidence that the political, economic, judicial, and social climate of opinion was stacked against the worker?
- What are contemporary examples of Big Business? Are the similar arguments used for and against Big Business in the Gilded Age used in the modern economy?
Dear Parent/ Guardian and Student,

My name is George Gray and I have been teaching Advanced Placement United States History for the past several years. I received my undergraduate degree in History from Winthrop University and master’s degree in Secondary Administration from The Citadel. I have decided to continue my education, and I am now enrolled in the University of South Carolina’s doctorate program in Curriculum and Instruction. In order to complete my program of study, I need to conduct an action research in my classroom. Your child has been selected to participate in the action research study since they are in my AP United States History course.

The action research will present the students with a project-based learning curriculum to help enhance their critical thinking skills and engagement within the classroom. The students will be analyzing historical documents, participating in-group discussions, and writing argumentative essays.

I will be using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods during the action research to measure the students’ knowledge and motivation. The students will complete a pre and post assessment, questionnaire, and interviews. I will also be taking observational notes throughout the study. All of the information gathered during the action research will be confidential and pseudonyms will be used in my dissertation. Once my dissertation is completed, it will be published on the University of South Carolina’s database for future students and researchers.

Students would benefit from this research by having a better understanding of the information in AP United States History and be better prepared to pass the exams administered at the end of the course.

**Student:** I, ____________________, agree to participate in this study on Project-Based Learning in AP United States History. There is no penalty for not participating and I understand that I may opt out of the study at any time without penalty. The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research.

**Parent/ Guardian:** My child has my permission to participate in this project-based learning action research.

**Signature:** ______________________________
**Parent/ Guardian:** I do NOT wish for my child to participate in this project-based learning action research.

**Signature:** __________________________

Thank you,

George Gray  
Social Studies Teacher
APPENDIX D

PRE AND POST INTERVENTION ASSESSMENTS

The College Board
Advanced Placement Examination
1993
UNITED STATES HISTORY
Section II - Part A
(Suggested writing time-45 minutes)
Percent of Section II score-45

Directions: The following question requires you to construct a coherent essay that integrates your interpretation of Documents A-H and your knowledge of the period referred to in the question. High scores will be earned only by essays that both cite key pieces of evidence from the documents and draw on outside knowledge of the period. Some of the documents have been edited, and wording and punctuation have been modernized.

1. Although New England and the Chesapeake region were both settled largely by people of English origin, by 1700 the regions had evolved into two distinct societies. Why did this difference in development occur?

Use the documents AND your knowledge of the colonial period up to 1700 to develop your answer.

Document A

Source: John Winthrop, A Model of Christian Charity (Written on board the Arbella on the Atlantic Ocean, 1630)

God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, [that] in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity, other mean and in subjection.... [Yet] we must be knit together in this work as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.... We must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God.... shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us.
Document B

Source: Ship’s List of Emigrants Bound for New England John Porter, Deputy Clerk to Edward
Thoroughgood Weymouth the 20th of March, 1635

1. Joseph Hull, of Somerset, a minister, aged 40 years
2. Agnes Hull, his wife, aged 25 years
3. Joan Hull, his daughter, aged 15 years
4. Joseph Hull, his son, aged 13 years

5. Tristram, his son, aged 11 years
6. Elizabeth Hull, his daughter, aged 7 years
7. Temperance, his daughter, aged 9 years
8. Grisell Hull, his daughter, aged 5 years
9. Dorothy Hull, daughter, 3 years
10. Judith French, his servant, aged 20 years
11. John Wood, his servant, aged 20 years
12. Robert Dabyn, his servant, aged 28 years
13. Masachiell Bernard, of Batcombe, clothier in the county of Somerset, 24 years
14. Mary Bernard, his wife, aged 28 years
15. John Bernard, his son, aged 3 years
16. Nathaniel, his son, aged 1 year

21. Timothy Tabor, in Somerset of Batcombe, tailor, aged 35 years
22. Jane Tabor, his wife, aged 35 years
23. Jane Tabor, his daughter, aged 19 years
24. Anne Tabor, his daughter, aged 6 years
25. Sarah Tabor, his daughter, aged 5 years
26. William Fever, his servant, aged 20 years
27. John Whitmarke, aged 39 years
28. Alice Whitmarke, his wife, aged 35 years
29. James Whitmarke, his son, aged 5 years
30. Jane, his daughter, aged 7 years
31. Onseph Whitmarke, his son, aged 5 years
32. Rich. Whitmarke, his son, aged 2 years
Document E

Source: Wage and Price Regulations in Connecticut, 1676

Whereas a great cry of oppression is heard among us, and that principally pointed at workmen and traders, which is hard to regulate without a standard for pay, it is therefore ordered that... prices and wages be duly set at each of our General Courts annually... [II] breaches of this order to be punished proportionable to the value of the oppression... This court... in the interim recommends... that all tradesmen and laborers consider the religious end of their callings, which is that receiving such moderate profit as may enable them to serve God and their neighbors with their arts and trades comfortably, they do not enrich themselves suddenly and inordinately (by oppression of prices and wages to the impoverishing of their neighbors... live in the practice of that crying sin of oppression, but avoid it.

Document F

Source: Captain John Smith. History of Virginia, 1624

When the large ship departed, these of us that had money, spare clothes, credit to give bills of payment, gold rings, fur, or any such commodities, were ever welcome to purchase supplies. The rest of us patiently obeyed our vile commanders and bought our provisions at fifteen times the value yet did not repine but fasted, lest we should incur the censure of being factions and seditious persons. Our ordinary food was but meal and water so that this little relieved our wants, whereby with the extremity of the bitter cold frost more than half of us died.

The worst among us were the gold seekers who, with their golden promises made all men their slaves in hope of recompenses. There was no talk... but dig gold, wash gold, refine gold, lead gold. Smith, perceiving [we lived] from hand to mouth, caused the pinnace [small ship] to be provided with things fitting to get provision for the year following.

[Two councillors:] Wingfield and Kendall, did strengthen themselves with the sailors and other confederates... and planned to go aboard the pinnace to alter her course and to go for England.

Smith had the plot discovered to him. Much trouble he had to prevent it, till with store of sake and musket shot he forced them to stay or sink in the river; which action cost the life of Captain Kendall.

These brawls are so disgustful, as some will say, they were better forgotten.
Document G

Source: Governor Berkeley and His Council on Their Inability to Defend Virginia Against a Dutch Attack, December 1673

We thought it our duty . . . to set forth in this our Declaration, the true state and condition of this country in general and our particular . . . disability[y] to . . . [engage in] war at the time of this invasion [by the Dutch]. . . . [We] therefore do most humbly beseech your majesty and your most honorable council to consider that Virginia is intersected by so many vast rivers as makes more miles to defend than we have men of trust to defend them. For by our nearest computation we leave at our backs as many servants (besides Negroes) as there are freemen to defend the shores and all our frontiers [against] the Indians. . . . [This] gives men fearful apprehensions of the danger they leave their estates and families in, while they are drawn from their houses to defend the borders. Also at least one third [of the freemen available for defense] are single freemen (whose labor will hardly maintain them) or men much in debt, . . . [whom] we may reasonably expect upon any small advantage the enemy may gain upon us, . . . [to defect] to them in hopes of bettering their condition by sharing the plunder of the country with them.

Document H

Source: Bacon's "Manifesto: justifying his rebellion against Virginia Governor Berkeley in 1676"

We cannot in our hearts find one single spot of rebellion or treason or that we have in any manner aimed at subverting the settled government. . . . All people in all places where we have yet been can attest our civil, quiet, peaceable behavior far different from that of rebellion. . . . Let truth be bold and all the world know the real foundations of pretended guilt. . . . Let us trace . . . [the] men in authority and favor to whose hands the dispensation of the country[y]'s wealth has been committed. Let us observe the sudden rise of their estates . . . [compared] with the quality in which they first entered this country. Let us consider their sudden advancement. And let us also consider whether any public work for our safety and defense or for the advancement and propagation of trade, liberal arts or sciences is in any [way] adequate to our vast charge. Now let us compare these things together and see what sponges have sucked up the public treasure and whether it has not been privately courted away by unworthy favorites and juggling parasites whose tottering fortunes have been repaired and supported at the public charge.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reporting Category</th>
<th>Scoring Criteria</th>
<th>Decision Rules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. THESIS/CLAIM</strong></td>
<td>1 pt. Responds to the prompt with a historically defensible thesis/claim that establishes a line of reasoning.</td>
<td>To earn this point, the thesis must make a claim that responds to the prompt rather than restating or rephrasing the prompt. The thesis must consist of one or more sentences located in one place, either in the introduction or the conclusion.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B. CONTEXTUALIZATION</strong></td>
<td>1 pt. Describes a broader historical context relevant to the prompt.</td>
<td>To earn this point, the response must relate the topic of the prompt to broader historical events, developments, or processes that occur before, during, or continue after the time frame of the question. This point is not awarded for merely a phrase or reference.</td>
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<td><strong>C. EVIDENCE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>(0–5 pts)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Evidence from the Documents</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>1 pt. Uses the content of at least two documents to address the topic of the prompt.</td>
<td>To earn one point, the response must accurately describe—rather than simply quote—the content from at least two of the documents.</td>
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<td><strong>AND</strong> 1 pt. Supports an argument in response to the prompt using two documents.</td>
<td>To earn two points, the response must accurately describe—rather than simply quote—the content from at least two documents. In addition, the response must use the content of the documents to support an argument in response to the prompt.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>AND</strong> 1 pt. Supports an argument in response to the prompt using at least four documents.</td>
<td>To earn three points, the response must accurately describe—rather than simply quote—the content from at least four documents. In addition, the response must use the content of the documents to support an argument in response to the prompt.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Evidence Beyond the Documents</strong></td>
<td>To earn this point, the response must describe the evidence and must use more than a phrase or reference. This additional piece of evidence must be different from the evidence used to earn the point for contextualization.</td>
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<td>1 pt. Uses at least one additional piece of the specific historical evidence (beyond that found in the documents) relevant to an argument about the prompt.</td>
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<td>Reporting Category</td>
<td>Scoring Criteria</td>
<td>Decision Rules</td>
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<td><strong>D. ANALYSIS AND REASONING</strong>&lt;br&gt;(0–3 pts)</td>
<td>1 pt. For one document, explains how or why the document's point of view, purpose, historical situation, and/or audience is relevant to an argument. <strong>AND</strong> 1 pt. For a second document, explains how or why the document's point of view, purpose, historical situation, and/or audience is relevant to an argument.</td>
<td>To earn this point, the response must explain how or why (rather than simply identifying) the document's point of view, purpose, historical situation, or audience is relevant to an argument about the prompt for each of the documents sourced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 pt.</td>
<td>Demonstrates a complex understanding of the historical development that is the focus of the prompt, using evidence to corroborate, qualify, or modify an argument that addresses the question.</td>
<td>A response may demonstrate a complex understanding in a variety of ways, such as:</td>
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<td>A response may demonstrate a complex understanding in a variety of ways, such as:</td>
<td>• Explaining nuance of an issue by analyzing multiple variables</td>
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<td>• Explaining both similarity and difference, or explaining both continuity and change, or explaining multiple causes, or explaining both cause and effect</td>
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<td>• Explaining relevant and insightful connections within and across periods</td>
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<td>• Confirming the validity of an argument by corroborating multiple perspectives across themes</td>
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<td>• Qualifying or modifying an argument by considering diverse or alternative views or evidence</td>
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APPENDIX E

TEACHER OBSERVATIONAL NOTES FORMAT

Table Appendix. *Teacher Observational Notes*

Teacher Observation Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date &amp; Time</th>
<th>Observations/Cell-Phone Use</th>
<th>Positives in the Classroom</th>
<th>Negatives in the Classroom</th>
<th>General Notes &amp; Reflections</th>
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APPENDIX F

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Prior to this class, I truly enjoyed my social studies courses and learning about the connections between past and present events.
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neutral
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree

2. Prior this class, I was in social studies classes that required more than simple memorization (recall of facts and basic concepts) to be successful.
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neutral
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree

3. Prior this class, I understood how to be a self-directed learner and was responsible for my learning experience.
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neutral
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree

4. After this class, I understand how to be a self-directed learner and feel accountable for my learning experience.
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neutral
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree

5. After this course, I truly enjoy learning about history and the various interpretations of past events.
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neutral
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree
APPENDIX G

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you feel you have become a more self-directed learner after completing this AP United States history course? Why or why not?
2. What are your strengths as a student after completing this course and the Taking Sides project?
3. What are your weaknesses as a student after completing this course and the Taking Sides project?
4. What was your favorite part of the Taking Sides assignment or project-based learning unit?
5. What was your least favorite part of the Taking Sides assignment or project-based learning unit?
6. In your opinion, what was the overall purpose of the Taking Sides assignment or project-based learning unit?
7. Did the Taking Sides independent research, group discussions, and essay writing help or hurt your learning experience?
8. During the course, do you feel you had (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) ownership and choice of your learning experience?
9. After completing the course, have your attitudes towards history and social studies changed? If so, how?
10. What strategies have you learned in this social studies course that you will use as a lifelong learner and improve your citizenship skills?