

Enhancing Student Engagement in High School Social Studies Classrooms

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The supervisory committee met with the candidate for a final evaluation in which all aspects of the candidate's program were reviewed. The committee's assessment and recommendations are:

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Before beginning this master's program, when looking back upon my educational history, I would likely have claimed that I had a pretty standard K-12 experience. I went to pre-school, kindergarten, middle school, high school, and then went off to college following my graduation from 12th grade. I attended public schools within the Salem-Keizer school district in Salem, Oregon, the second-largest in the state. I would consider myself an average student who had mixed feelings about school. There were parts of it I enjoyed, like seeing friends, certain subjects/classes, and going on field trips. There were parts of it I didn't enjoy, like getting up early, doing homework, and certain other subjects/classes. To me, my experience had seemed like a run-of-the-mill K-12 public school journey.

But the more I've learned through this program, the more I have realized that my experience was far from what many people experienced during their K-12 years. Unbeknownst to me at the time, there were a lot of factors going in my favor which influenced my experience. I had two loving and supportive parents, who were involved in my education and motivated and supported me every step of the way. I came from a middle-class background and lived in a more well-off area, meaning I had the opportunity to attend well-funded and well-maintained schools.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of how my economic status influenced my K-12 journey was my experience in my high school's marching band. In my five years as part of the band, we traveled to over a dozen competitions across Oregon. We traveled out of state several times, from Washington to California to even Hawaii and Indiana, the latter of which hosted the 'national championship' for competitive high school marching bands. Our band was the only one west of Texas which attended. This experience was even comparable to my experience in college, where I continued in the University of Oregon marching band and traveled to several bowl games

across the country. While my college band was funded by the university itself, my high school band received several generous donations from community members and ‘band boosters.’ In both cases, not one cent came out of my own pocket. Travel fees, uniform costs, instrument maintenance - all were covered by someone else.

But there is one important factor influencing my K-12 experience that I have not yet covered; the teachers. Thanks to the efforts of my parents, I was enrolled in these well-funded schools, which could in turn hire and retain some of the best teachers the state had to offer. For example, my marching band was led by a highly skilled and dedicated director, who was a professional at his craft and held in high regard by his students. Despite not being overly fond of school, there were several teachers I had over the years with whom I developed good relationships, who made school enjoyable and drove me to do better.

My entire journey as a prospective social studies teacher would likely not have happened without the existence of one teacher in particular; my AP U.S. History teacher, Drew Moneke. Drew was well-known amongst the student body at my high school, and I heard stories about him before even taking his class. Any student who had him as a teacher at one point told me to hope that I was put in his class when I enrolled in APUSH. When I finally reached my junior year, I was excited to see his name on my class schedule. It was time to find out what all the commotion was about.

Up to this point, I had never had a particular interest in history or social studies. I had hardly remembered anything I had learned and hardly recalled having many memorable experiences in previous history or social studies classes. I mainly remembered being bored and uninterested. Classes frequently relied heavily on lectures or textbooks, and many periods ended up feeling like eternities. My teachers had been nice, but I never really developed a notable

relationship with any of them. As a result, I had never been excited about any of my history or social studies classes. The main reason I had even enrolled in APUSH was because my parents wanted me to, and that I would receive college credit for doing so.

But Drew's class was different. I distinctly remember walking down the hallway to his class on the first day, seeing him waiting outside the door greeting students, something I had rarely seen a teacher do. Even from far away, I could feel the energy and excitement that he radiated. When I arrived at the door, he greeted me with a big smile, a handshake, and gestured for me to enter. His room was covered wall-to-wall with posters, student work, and other materials. Paintings from previous student projects were hanging from the ceiling. One wall was covered with dozens of national flags, something he later half-jokingly told us was a fire concern that frequently got him in trouble with the fire marshal.

When the bell rang, he got right to work. He wasted no time in introducing himself and his classroom, speaking with such energy that his passion for teaching and history could not have gone unnoticed. Throughout the year, he maintained this energy and passion, which in turn affected his students. I had never seen a classroom, let alone a history classroom, have so many students participating in classroom activities, volunteering answers to questions, and involved in the material. I was caught up in the excitement. Through Drew's class, I discovered a passion for history and for studying and understanding the past, something I did not know I had within me. I truly began to consider becoming a teacher one day, something that would have never crossed my mind just a year before. He made history fun, exciting, and meaningful to me, so much so that I decided that I wanted to try and do the same.

While I have found that my general K-12 experience was far from the norm for many people in the United States, I have found that my experience in history classes before APUSH

was unfortunately the norm for many. During my early high school years, most of my friends and other students shared my apathy and lack of excitement when it came to history and social studies. Those classes were just... boring. There were no two ways about it. Pretty much every student I knew had a favorite class or subject - science, band, language arts, you name it. But I can't recall anyone saying their favorite subject was history. This isn't to say that everyone disliked history and social studies; it was just a rare occurrence to find someone who did.

This problem has become more evident to me throughout this master's program. Getting students engaged and invested into the subject matter has been a continuous struggle for teachers over time. Historically, much of the blame has been put on the students themselves; students are called lazy, unmotivated, or undisciplined. While this mentality has changed in recent years, it still remains prevalent among some teaching circles. While it may be easier to put the blame for low engagement in social studies classes on the students and to leave it at that, research indicates that there may be more to the problem. The question, then, becomes this; Why are social studies classes seemingly so unengaging? What can we change to make them as engaging, interesting, and important to students as they should be?

With these questions in mind, the main purpose of this action research project is to determine why social studies classes fail to engage and impact students. What is it about standard high school social studies classes - be it content, structure, or pedagogy - that makes them so unengaging for many students? Additionally, I aim to compile several different strategies of increasing engagement within high school social studies classes and to analyze them. What are the different strengths and weaknesses of each strategy or method? What is the best strategy, or strategies, for certain scenarios? I aim to provide a guideline that I and other new teachers can follow in order to increase engagement within their classrooms.

Guiding Pedagogical Theory

One of my main goals of being an educator is to have a lasting and positive impact on the lives of my students and my community. And in order to become a successful and impactful teacher on the lives of my students, like Drew Moneke was for me, I need to answer these questions regarding engagement. This begins with my own educational philosophy and the pedagogical theory that guides it.

Before beginning this program my educational philosophy and my ‘why’ for becoming a teacher were pretty straightforward. They essentially boiled down to ‘educating and preparing students for their future lives and work.’ This stemmed from my own educational experience; I believed that much of what I was taught was meant to help prepare me for the workforce and whatever job I would hold. There was no thought in my head about making education equitable, since through my own experience, I thought it already was. Fortunately, what I’ve learned during the course of this program has expanded my horizons and knowledge significantly, and this has resulted in a significant shift in regards to my educational philosophy. Currently, my goal as a teacher is to provide a welcoming and accessible environment where students are encouraged and challenged to build connections, think critically and independently, and to prepare them for the lives they lead now and in the future. Education should not be a tool for restriction; rather, it should grow the mind and the heart.

Based on my experience and pedagogical grounding, it is clear that both the philosophy of the education system and the curriculum of the system are outdated and in need of change. Philosopher Paulo Freire identifies these problems in his description of the current educational system, which he calls the ‘banking method’ of education. He explains, “education is suffering from narration sickness. The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static,

compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students” (Freire, 2018, p. 71). In other words, our current model for education does not result in meaningful learning for students. The teacher ‘deposits’ information and the students ‘store’ it, hence the term ‘banking method.’ This system stifles creativity and independent thinking, prioritizing memorization and repetition. Additionally, the curriculum very rarely connects with students, their lives, and experiences. Nor does it challenge them or expand their horizons. In order to counter these problems, my philosophy and method of teaching seeks to do the opposite that the current system does.

To cultivate joy and engagement within my classroom, I will encourage students to think creatively, rather than have them memorize information and regurgitate it to me at my request. I will provide content that is culturally relevant for all my students. I will encourage students to build connections with one another, and will also work to build connections with them. This will not only cultivate joy and engagement, but also help counter the problems of our current system. Activist and philosopher bell hooks gives us a good idea of how this strategy will grow and develop the hearts and minds of students. She advocates for teaching “in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students” which “is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks, 1994, p. 13). In short, this statement refers to the fact that education is built upon the relationships that develop in the classroom. Real learning cannot take place if the student-teacher relationship is nothing more than the teacher providing knowledge and the students taking and storing that knowledge.

My educational philosophy requires a more in-depth relationship than the superficial student-teacher one that currently stands. A student’s life extends far beyond the classroom; it includes their home, family, friends, communities, interests, beliefs, dreams. As a teacher, I have

to acknowledge these things. This will include building connections with the student's community and with my community. Community input when it comes to education is vital. I recognize that I am not all-knowing, and will thus encourage community involvement and engagement in the education of the next generation. I must ensure that they know that their thoughts, recommendations, and ideas are valued and heard.

So what is the connection between this educational philosophy and the pedagogical approach I will take for this project? In order to achieve my goals regarding engagement and interest in social studies classes, I will need to borrow from several leading pedagogical theories. There is not one singular pedagogical theory that guides my work; instead, multiple portions of multiple theories will be used.

For example, one pedagogical theory I will borrow from is behaviorism. Per psychologist Saul McLeod, the theory of behaviorism argues that "all behaviors are learned through conditioned interaction with the environment" (McLeod, 2025, pp. 2). For example, if a student performs well on a test in class and receives positive feedback from their teacher, behaviorism would argue that the student is more likely to repeat the good behavior thanks to the desirable outcome of said behavior. Likewise, if a student misbehaves in class and goes to lunch detention because of it, behaviorism would argue that the student is less likely to repeat the misbehavior because of the undesirable outcome of said behavior. While behaviorism is not perfect, like any educational theory, there are components I will borrow from it, like the idea of consistent reinforcement of behaviors. Essentially, if I see a student engaged in good behaviors, I will give them quick and consistent positive feedback, which will hopefully reinforce their good behavior. Likewise, if I see a student misbehaving, I will again respond with quick and consistent constructive feedback, which is meant to discourage said behavior.

Another theory which guides my study is humanism. As McLeod explains, “Humanistic psychology is an approach that focuses on individual potential and personal growth. It emphasizes free will, self-actualization, and the importance of a supportive environment for psychological well-being” (McLeod, 2025, pp. 1-2). In other words, humanism is a more student-centered approach that focuses on the student as a whole, seeking to emphasize things like personal growth and prioritizes increasing intrinsic motivation. While behaviorism dabbles heavily in extrinsic motivation, humanism seeks to grow students’ intrinsic motivation by ensuring that students have their needs addressed. Once students have had these needs addressed, whether they be basic needs like food and shelter or individual needs like self-efficacy and competence, students are then able to fully focus on their education and invest themselves in it. Motivation as a whole ties in closely with humanism, and motivation and engagement are central to the problem I seek to remedy with this project.

Connection to InTASC Standards

Aside from my educational philosophy, one of the things I want to prioritize as a teacher is being more empathetic. Being empathetic has never been something that came naturally to me, and as I’ve grown older, I’ve realized that empathy isn’t something that does come naturally to anybody; it needs to be learned. There isn’t enough empathy going around in the world, and I want to be someone who will work to change that. Empathetic and encouraging is the type of teacher I hope and believe I am becoming. That can and does start in the classroom.

Teachers can play as big of a role or as small a role in the lives of their students and community as they want. If a teacher wants to have a big impact on the lives of their students and community, accomplishing that begins with effort. It requires great amounts of effort to build relationships with your students, their families, and their community. But the difference it makes

is significant. Being a caring adult in the lives of your students has so many positive benefits for the student. As a student, my favorite teachers, like Drew Moneke, were always the ones that I felt genuinely cared about me and my future. These were not only my favorite teachers, but also the ones that I felt were the best at their jobs. It felt like so many teachers just didn't care, and as a result left very little impact on me. If my teacher doesn't care, why should I? Rather, it was the teachers who built connections with me as a person, rather than merely as a teacher, who had the biggest positive impact on my life.

Through my teaching goals and the pedagogical theories I intend to follow, I plan to address numerous InTASC standards. Standard #3 for example is an excellent candidate for my focus on humanism. Per the Oregon Department of Education and the Council of Chief State School Officers, this standard involves "the teacher work[ing] with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self motivation" (ODE & CCSSO, 2011, pp. 7). Essentially, this boils down to the teacher creating a positive learning environment that supports social and emotional learning in students. By creating a positive learning environment that fulfills the expectations mentioned above, I can help my students grow as people, not just as students. This will also help me create lessons that adequately challenge my students to think critically and creatively, which can increase their engagement in my social studies classes.

Another standard I can fulfill is Standard #6, which involves using "multiple methods of assessment to engage learners in their own growth, to monitor learner progress, and to guide the teacher's and learner's decision making" (ODE & CCSSO, 2011, pp. 10). In short, this means that the teacher uses different methods to assess the growth of their students (not just standardized tests). Part of seeing the whole child, and helping my students grow in multiple

ways, is to give them plenty of options to demonstrate what they know. Students are tested enough; I will devise creative and alternative ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge, ways that challenge students to continue to grow and to think critically and creatively.

This is the teacher I strive to become. One who cares about their students as people, more so than just caring about whether they do their assignments and get good grades. I want to inspire students to be creative, to be independent thinkers, and to challenge the world around them. I don't necessarily want to teach them what to think, but rather how to think. The world needs more people like that. People willing to stand up for what they think is right, and to fight for a better future for themselves and others. That is the kind of person I am becoming, and that means that is the kind of teacher I will be.

Summary

In my introduction, I reflect on how I used to believe I had a fairly typical K-12 experience. I went through public schools and saw myself as an average student who liked some parts of school and disliked others. But through this master's program, I've realized that my educational journey was shaped by many advantages I didn't recognize at the time - supportive parents, a stable middle-class background, and access to new, well-funded schools. I never had to worry about affordability, something that is far from universal.

Another key advantage I had was access to excellent teachers, and one teacher in particular who strongly impacted my life. Before APUSH, history had always felt boring and forgettable to me. But the energy, passion, and genuine care this teacher showed for me transformed the subject into something exciting and meaningful. Because of his influence, I discovered my own love for history and began to consider becoming a teacher myself.

The contrast between my engaging APUSH experience and the common disengagement many students feel in social studies led me to a central question: Why are social studies classes often so unengaging, and what can be changed? This question now guides my developing educational philosophy, which has shifted from a narrow focus on preparing students for future jobs to a broader, equity-centered vision of fostering critical thinking, joy, and meaningful relationships. To answer this question, I aim to highlight and analyze different strategies for increasing engagement within a social studies classroom. By providing examples of different strategies, I aim to create a guideline that I and future teachers can use to help increase student engagement in our classrooms. I will draw on multiple pedagogical theories, such as humanism and behaviorism, to support student motivation and growth. My ultimate goal is to be an empathetic, student-centered teacher that inspires curiosity and critical thinking in my students.

Chapter 2. Review of Relevant Research and Scholarship

Article #1: *The Teacher's Role in Increasing Student Engagement in High School Social Studies*

Courses by Quarnitra Price

Price's study explores how high school teachers' instructional practices influence student engagement and performance in social studies classrooms, including how teachers make content relatable and motivate students to engage with social studies concepts. Price completed a case study which involved interviewing social studies teachers to examine their practices and the barriers that prevent student engagement. The research was analyzed by studying these interview transcripts to identify key patterns in teacher practices and perceived engagement factors. Price concluded that teachers play an essential role in shaping how students perceive and engage with social studies content, identifying seven themes (these themes being relevancy, engagement, federal and state legislation, appropriateness, critical thinking and informed decision-making approaches, social media and social issues, and civic education) that influence engagement. She also notes barriers such as lack of relevance and policy constraints that hinder active student participation.

There are several strengths in this article. For one thing, it is both contemporary and relevant to my research topic. The article was released in 2020, meaning it is more up-to-date, and the focus of the article is on student engagement. Another strength is that the article focuses specifically on high school social studies, which is both the specific content area I am researching for this project and the grade level I am planning on teaching. These factors make this article especially helpful for my research.

Article #2: Student engagement and project-based learning in the social studies classroom by
Noelle J. Nelson

This next article investigates how implementing project-based learning (PBL) in an 11th-grade social studies class affects student engagement. Nelson aimed to determine whether PBL strategies like collaboration, authentic tasks, and student choice could improve behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. The author used an action research design that includes classroom observations, student surveys, and reflective teacher journaling to examine changes in engagement during a PBL unit. She analyzed her findings and drew on engagement theory to categorize student behaviors and attitudes. Nelson concluded that PBL increased student engagement by promoting individual ownership of learning, encouraging deeper inquiry into social studies topics, and fostering positive student to student interactions. However, she also noted challenges such as uneven participation and the need for strong teacher facilitation to ensure productive and effective collaboration.

Thinking critically about the article, I would suggest increasing the sample size the author used to gather information. Much of the research and conclusions in the article come from one classroom, and much of the data is self-reported (for example, from student surveys or Nelson's own reflections). Because Nelson conducted the research in a single classroom with one teacher/researcher, the results reflect this very specific instructional context, which limits how applicable the findings may be to other classrooms or schools.

Article #3: Embedding literacy strategies in social studies for eighth-grade students by Alishia Gaston, James Martinez & Ellice P. Martin

This article, published within the *Journal of Social Sciences Education Research*, examines how embedding targeted literacy strategies into middle school social studies instruction influences student motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. Gaston, Martinez, and Martin implemented a literacy-focused intervention that included the use of multiple texts, structured reading supports, collaborative learning, and technology integration in an eighth-grade social studies classroom. The researchers used a mixed-methods design involving pre- and post-assessments, classroom observations, and student surveys which measured changes in student engagement and performance. Their analysis also used a literacy framework to evaluate how reading and writing strategies align with social studies content learning. The authors determined that this instruction significantly increased student engagement, improved comprehension of historical content, and strengthened students' ability to analyze and interact with complex texts.

There are several strengths in this article, as well as several areas it could be improved in. For one thing, the article does a good job of using mixed-methods through pre- and post-assessments, surveys, and observations. The authors also clearly connect engagement to specific literacy strategies, such as disciplinary literacy. The main hurdle I see when applying this research to my work is that it was done in an eighth grade classroom, which is not the grade level I will be focusing on. It also faces the issue of its small sample size like Article #2 does.

Article #4: *A longitudinal investigation of project-based instruction and student achievement in high school social studies* by Emily J. Summers & Gail Dickinson

This fourth article investigates the effects of project-based instruction (PBI) on students' academic achievement and college-and-career readiness in high school social studies. Summers

& Dickinson conducted a comparative study in a rural school district, following students across four years at two high schools, where one used a PBI curriculum and the other used a traditional social studies curriculum, to examine differences in standardized social studies achievement and readiness outcomes. Their analysis drew on achievement data and comparison of cohorts to evaluate the instructional impact, positioning the work within the framework of project-based and problem-based learning theory, which determines that extended, authentic projects support deeper learning and real-world competencies. The authors concluded that students in the PBI high school demonstrated greater gains in social studies achievement and college-and-career readiness compared to peers in the traditional instructional setting, which itself suggests that PBI can positively influence both academic outcomes and preparedness for post-high school goals.

Some of the strengths of this article included the fact that the study followed the two groups of students for a period of four years, helping capture and display long-term effects that other, shorter studies might not catch. It also involved the study and comparison of two different groups, as opposed to studying only one, which allows for comparison between the two. The main drawback I see to using this article for my research is that its focus is on achievement, rather than engagement. While PBI does touch on engagement in some areas, its main focus is improving academic achievement, which in turn is not the main focus of my work.

Article #5: Exploring student engagement in history and Social Studies in Problem-Based

Learning by Shannon Gardner

This is another study which examines how PBL influences student engagement in high school history and social studies classrooms. Gardner sought to understand how students experience engagement - behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally - when instruction is built

around inquiry-driven, problem-based tasks. Using an action research design, the author collected data through classroom observations, student interviews, teacher reflections, and analysis of instructional evidence in PBL-based social studies classrooms. The findings were analyzed using a student engagement framework grounded in constructivist and inquiry-based learning theory, which emphasized student autonomy, collaboration, and problem solving. Gardner concluded that PBL increased student engagement by promoting active participation and greater student ownership of learning, while also noting challenges related to classroom management and uneven student participation during open-ended tasks, similar to the conclusions drawn by Nelson in Article #2.

Thinking critically about this article, I would suggest clarifying the length of the study. The author does not explicitly state how long the study was run for, whether it was done over the course of a whole school year or perhaps for just a few weeks. Since the length is not clearly stated, our understanding of the study is limited; are the conclusions just a result of the study being short and novel for students, which could lead to increased engagement, or from some other reason?

Article #6: Project-Based Learning and Its Impact on Student Engagement, Well-Being, and Learning Outcomes: A Study of Teachers' Perspectives by Stefania Rubino

Turning to another article on PBL, Rubino's study focuses on student engagement and academic learning outcomes in secondary classroom settings. Rubino sought to determine whether continued use of PBL instructional strategies increased students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement compared to more traditional instructional approaches. The author employed a research design using pre- and post-assessments, student engagement surveys, and

academic performance data to measure changes in engagement and learning outcomes following the implementation of PBL units. More specifically, she focused on discovering the impact of PBL based on the perceptions and experiences of multiple teachers when it comes to PBL. The study drew on constructivist learning theory and project-based learning frameworks to interpret the results. Rubino concluded that students exposed to project-based learning demonstrated higher levels of engagement and improved academic performance, which suggests that PBL is an effective instructional approach for promoting active learning and sustained student involvement, a similar conclusion to articles mentioned above.

One strength of this article is the usage of teacher experiences to determine a conclusion. While the other PBL-focused articles I have covered do mention the importance of the teacher on an individual level, and how heavy teacher facilitation is needed for a more successful PBL experience, Rubino actually includes multiple examples of different teachers' experiences, which helps us examine how PBL actually works in a real classroom.

Article #7: School connection through engagement associated with grade scores and emotions of adolescents: Four factors to build engagement in schools by Terence Bowles, Janet Scull & Shane Jimerson

This next article examines the relationship between student engagement, school connectedness, emotional well-being, and academic performance among adolescent students. Bowles, Scull, and Jimerson conducted their study using survey data collected from middle and high school students to measure behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, alongside academic grades and emotional indicators. The researchers analyzed the data using a school engagement and school connectedness framework, drawing on psychological theories that

emphasize relationships and emotional regulation as foundations for engagement. The authors concluded that higher levels of student engagement and school connectedness were significantly associated with improved academic outcomes and more positive emotional experiences, which argues that engagement is a multidimensional construct influenced by both instructional and relational factors.

While this is a quality article with a focus on engagement, the main drawback to this article is that the focus is on social engagement, rather than academic engagement, which is what my research will be focusing on. Additionally, there is little to no mention of social studies throughout the article, which is the area I will mainly be focusing on.

Article #8: *Studying engagement in educational settings: a mapping review on high-impact academic engagement research* by Paola Loyola-Carrillo et al.

Appearing in the *Frontiers in Psychology* journal, this next article provides an in-depth review of high-impact research on student engagement across educational settings.

Loyola-Carrillo et al. conducted a review of peer-reviewed studies to identify dominant themes, theoretical frameworks, research methods, and gaps in the engagement literature. The analysis was guided by established engagement theories, particularly those which argue that engagement is behavioral, cognitive, and emotional, allowing the authors to categorize and compare trends across studies. The authors determined that while student engagement is widely recognized as essential to learning, the literature varies considerably in terms of definitions and measurement approaches.

Thinking critically about this article, it does not really make the type of argument about engagement that I am looking for, nor does it really have anything new to add to the field.

Instead, it is more of a collection and overview of existing theories and strategies. I believe the article could have included some new arguments or conclusions, but I also see that adding new research to the field wasn't really the goal of this specific source.

Article #9: *Innovative Learning Strategies and Students' Engagement in Social Science in Public Secondary High Schools* by Lily B. Padingding & Mary Grace O. Gallego

Found in the *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, this article covers the impact of innovative instructional strategies on student engagement in high school social science classrooms. The authors examined how teaching approaches such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities, and technology-supported instruction influenced students' participation and interest in social studies subjects. Data was collected from secondary students using surveys to measure levels of behavioral and emotional engagement. The study was analyzed through a student engagement framework which emphasized active participation and student-centered instruction. Padingding & Gallego concluded that innovative learning strategies significantly increased student engagement in social studies classes.

The article could have included a more detailed description of the strategies it covers. While the authors mention the usage of innovative learning strategies, they don't necessarily define each strategy or describe them in detail. They also do not clearly state the sample size; how many schools and classrooms are involved? What are the student demographics? Without this contextual information, any conclusions or arguments made end up being limited by the unclear sample size of the project.

Article #10: *Committed to differentiation and engagement: A case study of two American secondary social studies teachers* by Derek Anderson & Tanya Cook

This study examines how two 10th-grade United States history teachers designed and implemented an eight-week thematic unit intended to engage students through differentiated instruction. Anderson and Cook used multiple data sources, which included 38 lesson observations, teacher interviews, lesson plans, and student work to explore how instructional choices affected student engagement during the unit. The analysis drew on the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) framework for social studies instruction to interpret how differentiation and thematic teaching supported engagement. The authors concluded that while simulations, small-group discussions, and higher-order thinking initially increased engagement, the teachers gradually reverted to more traditional instruction, indicating that sustained engagement requires overcoming existing teaching habits and beliefs.

One way this article can be impactful to my teaching is how it highlights the importance of a sustained commitment to these engagement strategies. One of the main points of the article is that while the engagement strategies were successful in many ways, the teachers eventually fell back on their traditional methods of teaching. Creating and maintaining these thematic and differentiated lessons can have a positive effect, but they require a lot of effort on the teacher's part. Knowing this is helpful in several ways; it is both evidence that these thematic lessons can have an impact and that any teacher who tries to implement them will have to continually work to ensure they remain engaging and that the teacher avoids falling into old habits.

Article #11: *Investigating teacher influence on student engagement in high schools* by Jeff Thomas & Manoj Nair

This article focuses on how specific teacher practices influence levels of student engagement in high school classrooms. Thomas & Nair conducted a pre-post case study using student surveys and teacher focus group data to measure changes in engagement across multiple classes. Their analysis examined the correlation between teacher strategies and shifts in behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement indicators. The authors concluded that particular instructional approaches were strongly associated with engagement improvements, which provides evidence that teacher actions, not just curriculum content, play a pivotal role in engagement outcomes.

One way this article can be impactful to my teaching is that it reminds me how the teacher is oftentimes more important than the strategy. If I come up with the most creative, thematic, and engaging lesson plan ever conceived, but present it with no energy or enthusiasm, my students will likely reflect those muted energy levels and not get everything out of the activity that I may hope they do. Alternatively, if I come up with a standard, run-of-the-mill plan, but present it with excitement and energy, the students are more likely to be engaged with the material than if I appeared uninterested or bored.

Article #12: Enhancing senior high school student engagement and academic performance using an inclusive and scalable inquiry-based program by Locke Davenport Huyer et al.

This final research article analyzes the impact of a structured inquiry-based learning program on senior high school student engagement and academic performance. Using different measures of student engagement and achievement, the authors evaluated whether an inclusive, scalable inquiry design could increase both engagement and learning outcomes compared to traditional practices. Their findings demonstrated significant improvements in student

engagement and performance, which supports the effectiveness of structured inquiry experiences in high school environments. The study frames its analysis within constructivist and inquiry theory, showing how deeper student involvement with authentic questions correlates with higher engagement.

One strength of this study is that the inquiry-based program is scalable, meaning it can be replicated in different classrooms, schools, and districts, without losing its effectiveness. Since the program is not overly dependent on individual factors, like on one teacher or on having certain resources available, it means I can implement it, or a variation of it, and will still be able to see reliable results and effects.

Chapter 3. Methods

What is Action Research?

Action research is a process of inquiry where an individual or a group investigates work related to their field and uses that research to inform their own processes and strategies. The process of action research can be divided into seven steps, per Sagor (2000). These steps are as follows: 1) Selecting a focus 2) Clarifying theories 3) Identifying research questions 4) Collecting data 5) Analyzing data 6) Reporting results 7) Taking informed action. When a teacher uses action research, they are typically using it to help them improve in an area. For example, for this project, the focus I have selected is engagement, and specifically how to increase engagement in high school social studies classrooms. To fulfill this goal, I will gather data from my students regarding engagement - what kind of lessons are highly engaging? What kind aren't? The data will then help me improve my own teaching strategies.

Action research is a good method for this study because of several reasons. First of all, it is relevant to those participating in the research. Per Sagor (2000), "Relevance is guaranteed because the focus of each research project is determined by the researchers, who are also the primary consumers of the findings." In short, action research is done for a group or individual by said group or individual, ensuring that the project is relevant to them.

Another reason is that action research helps teachers become better at what they do. An important part of being a teacher is being able to constantly learn and grow. As Sagor (2000) explains, "perhaps even more important is the fact that action research helps educators be more effective at what they care most about - their teaching and the development of their students." Essentially, action research is a great way to learn and grow as an educator.

There are several research questions I am using to guide this study. Firstly, I want to determine why traditional social studies classes seem to be so unengaging for students. What is it about standard high school social studies classes - be it content, structure, or pedagogy - that makes them so unengaging for many students? It is clear there is an engagement problem, thus the first question that must be answered is why engagement is an issue.

Secondly, after determining why engagement is such an issue in a traditional high school social studies class, and therefore what doesn't work when it comes to engagement, the next factor to focus on is what does work. What different engagement strategies already exist? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies? And lastly, what strategy or strategies work best for certain scenarios? By answering these questions, I hope to know more about both what doesn't work and what does work when it comes to engagement within a high school social studies classroom.

Participants and Setting

The school I teach at, which I will refer to as "SHS," is located in the capital of Oregon, Salem, which is an urban environment. The class I will be using to inform my study consists of 28 high school freshmen. The class is called World Social Studies, and is an introductory course offered to freshmen which they must pass in order to graduate. Of these 28 students, five are on an IEP or 504 plan. Additionally, of these students, 14 are White, 11 are Hispanic/Latino, 2 are Asian, and 1 identifies as mixed-race. 13 students are male and 15 students are female. Lastly, 12 students are classified as emergent bilinguals.

With roughly 40% of students being Hispanic/Latino, 7% being Asian, and about 3% identifying as mixed-race, there is a diverse student body within my classroom. Additionally, students come from many different economic backgrounds, with a roughly even split of

economically advantaged and economically disadvantaged students. Furthermore, this includes academic diversity as well, as students appear in all parts of the academic spectrum, ranging from high academic achievement and general engagement to middle and low academic achievement and engagement.

I have worked with this group of students for roughly seven months, and they have grown a considerable amount in that time. It has been a joy watching them mature, make connections, and improve as students and people. With this group, I believe one of my strengths is that I have made good connections with a majority of my students. Teaching is all about relationships, and I have found both through research and experience that having a good relationship with a student can make a huge difference as to whether they have a positive experience in your classroom or not. The presence of just one caring and supportive adult in the life of a student is critical in their growth, development, and success. As a new teacher, I have prioritized maximizing opportunities to build positive relationships with students.

I do this in several different ways. First, I always stand by the door at the beginning and end of each period so I can interact with students as they come in and out. This helps start and end the period on a positive note and ensures that I have an opportunity to speak with every student, even if it is brief. I also work to set aside time during lessons to ask them questions about their lives and their interests. Knowing more about the personal lives of my students helps me get to know them better and gives me opportunities to try and incorporate their interests into my lessons. Lastly, I do my best to be kind and supportive. I work to have an upbeat and positive attitude, which sets the right tone in my class and helps ensure that students feel supported.

While I believe that I have done a good job in building relationships with many students, I can certainly improve in that area. There are unfortunately several students who I have had

little to no interaction with. Many students are chronically absent, tardy, or unengaged, no matter what activity we are doing in class that day. Building relationships with these students and engaging them in class has been difficult, and unfortunately I have not seen a lot of success with this. By completing this action research project, a goal of mine is that I will be able to create more engaging lessons that encourage these students to attend class and participate.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this project, I used a variety of methods to collect data. Firstly, I used several types of formal and informal assessments. Our students use interactive notebooks, and this is where a large amount of these assessments can be found. Regarding formal assessments, while students are asked to complete tests for some units, for others they will be asked to do a project or some other type of assessment. For example, at the end of our unit on Oceania, for their unit final, students completed a travel pamphlet for the region, where they would describe different parts of its history and culture. After these assessments were graded, I passed them back to students and had them tape these pamphlets into their notebooks, so they could look back on their work and see their progression as we got further into the school year.

Other informal assessments included exit tickets, graphic organizers, and reflections. Whether or not a student took class notes, whether or not they completed the assignment for the day, and more can be found by checking student notebooks. A big portion of a student's grade is also dependent upon them completing their work in a timely manner, so the amount of effort a student puts into their notebook is reflected in the gradebook.

Both my own observations and conversations with my mentor teacher also served to provide data. As we went through different lessons, I would keep an eye on students, looking for who was engaged, who wasn't, and for the amount of time certain students would spend fully

engaged or fully unengaged. Conversing with my mentor teacher also gave me another perspective on my lessons and what went well or what went not as well. As he is a highly experienced teacher, he was able to provide feedback and make recommendations for future lessons and strategies.

All of this data, whether it comes from formal and informal assessments, teacher observations, or student surveys, helped inform my research as I completed this project. The data helped me determine which lessons students found engaging, which ones they didn't, the role of engagement in a particular lesson, and how much of an impact different engagement strategies had on student success. The end goal of making lessons more engaging is ultimately to help students succeed and learn better. Thus, the data I have gathered helps me see how close I am, and how close different engagement strategies are, to achieving this goal.

For analyzing these sources of data, I followed the recommendations of Sagor (2000) and worked to both triangulate the data I collected and to answer some generic questions, these questions being 1) What is the story told by these data, and 2) Why did the story play itself out this way? When it comes to triangulation, it is important to use more than one source of data. For example, a good source of data comes from student surveys. Students can fill out these surveys and answer questions that aid my research - simple questions such as "Was this lesson engaging? Why or why not?" are easy for students to answer, and their answers help inform my research. However, it would be unwise to rely solely on this source of data. For instance, students are people, and people make mistakes. Students could also answer the surveys with what they think I want to hear, not necessarily how they truly feel. Thus, triangulating data - meaning to collect multiple sources of data and comparing and contrasting them to one another - is important for the accuracy, depth, and credibility of the project.

Another way I analyzed data was by answering some questions regarding each source of it. Asking myself the questions - what is the story told by the data, and why did the story shape up this way - help provide guidelines for my data analysis. Simply looking at the raw data might not tell the full story; thus, asking and answering questions regarding the data narrowed my focus and helped me process the information better.

Researcher Positionality

As a white male from a middle class family, I have had a much different K-12 experience than many of my students. I had my basic needs met; I never had to worry about money or food or where I would sleep. I had involved parents who motivated and encouraged me to do better. I didn't fully understand the benefits of this until recent years, as I have learned about the challenges that many students face in their personal and their school lives. Part of the reason I chose to focus on humanism as a guiding theory through this project is because it is so student-centered. I want to follow the guidance of a theory that helps me understand, develop relationships with, and meet students where they are at.

It is difficult to truly understand something without ever having experienced it. I can learn about the difficulties many of my students face in their lives, but will never be able to fully understand them since I did not have to face many of those same difficulties. Using this guiding theory, however, gets me closer to understanding my students who face these challenges. And the closer I come to understanding my students, the better I am able to make informed decisions, make my social studies class a more welcoming and engaging environment, and ultimately help students grow.

Chapter 4. Findings

Key Themes

After researching some of the causes of low student engagement in their social studies classes, and analyzing the data, three key themes have emerged. First, students find traditional social studies lessons unengaging more so because of the ways and methods the content is learned and presented, rather than the content itself. Second, lessons designed to be more engaging didn't always lead to better results regarding student learning. Third, student engagement increased the most when lessons were relevant to students, when learning was active rather than passive, and when students had autonomy in their learning. I will discuss each of these themes and the evidence that supports them.

Why Students Find Their Social Studies Classes Unengaging

The first question I sought to answer when completing this action research project is why so many students seem to find traditional social studies classes so unengaging. Furthermore, are there any specific practices or methods commonly used in social studies classes that are contributing to this engagement problem? Is it mostly the way the classes are taught, the actual content covered in classes, or perhaps a mix of both? Based on the data I have gathered and analyzed, there are a number of reasons that students find social studies classes unengaging. I will be focusing on three of these reasons. They are: 1) a lack of connection to the lives of students, 2) too much passive learning, and 3) a focus on breadth rather than depth. This leads into my second conclusion for this first theme; students largely find social studies classes unengaging not because of the content itself, but because of the way the content is presented.

When I was in high school, while learning about math and science and history and other topics, I found myself wondering, "Why does this matter to me?" Why was learning about the

quadratic formula or the periodic table or the Cold War important to me personally? Students are people, and people seek connections. When students struggle to make connections to what they are learning, their engagement can struggle. Anderson & Cook (2014) claimed, “Teacher-centered instruction is textbook-driven, resulting in students developing negative attitudes towards social studies, as they are not engaged or experiencing any real-life connection to the material” (p. 2). What this means is if a student isn’t able to make a personal connection with what they are learning, or fail to understand why what they are learning is important or useful to them, their chances of being actively engaged in the material diminish.

More evidence supporting this claim can be found in the article focused on problem-based learning by Gardner (2022). In her own action research project, Gardner sought to “investigate and strengthen the relationship between student engagement in problem-based learning (PBL) for middle and high school students” (p. 10). Through her research, Gardner determined one of the reasons students felt unengaged in both social studies classrooms and school in general was that students were not understanding how the material was relevant to them. “Chronic absenteeism, low student growth, and dropout rates are all serious concerns. Some students are disengaged and not finding relevance in school” (Gardner, 2022, p. 10). Essentially, when students do not see the relevance to their own lives, they struggle to engage with the material.

Fortunately, this issue is well-understood by many leading educators and researchers. For example, the National Council for the Social Sciences, or NCSS, has spent many years working to combat the connection issues found in many social studies classrooms. They have recommended “powerful and purposeful social studies instruction, which consists of instruction that is ‘meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active’” (Anderson & Cook, 2014,

p. 2). Essentially, lessons should be designed to be meaningful to students. However, while the issue is well-understood, fixing it has proven to be the more challenging part.

A lot of factors are putting strain on social studies teachers in both middle and high school. With federal and state governments and school districts placing a greater emphasis on core subjects like science and math, social studies classes have increasingly lost importance and priority. This neglect, combined with ever-increasing content standards to be met, has forced many teachers to adopt instruction methods that fail to develop connections between students and the content. “The challenges and stresses of covering an overwhelming amount of content has prompted teachers to adopt more teacher-centered instructional methods” (Anderson & Cook, 2014, p. 2). Thus, while many teachers understand the issues with their methods, many continue to stick by them due to increasing expectations and diminishing funding and support.

A second reason students find social studies classes unengaging is the fact many social studies classrooms are overwhelmingly driven by passive learning. Per Johns Hopkins University, passive learning is “instructor-centered. This means you as the student will attend a professor’s lecture and then internalize the material through re-reading notes or highlighting large chunks of information when reviewing” (John Hopkins University, n.d). Essentially, passive learning involves students absorbing information from their teacher with minimal direct interaction or feedback, very similar to the banking method of education discussed in Chapter 1.

While passive learning itself is not a bad or negative way to teach, it should not be the sole method a teacher uses. It is good for quickly introducing new material and for covering a lot of material when under a time constraint. However, this method is very unengaging for most students, as learning is very superficial. When analyzing which types of lessons saw the most off-task behavior in students, Anderson & Cook (2014, p. 9) noted that “our observations

consistently revealed more off-task behavior in the teacher-centered lessons compared to more student-centered lessons and activities.” In short, during these teacher-centered, passive learning lessons, students found it harder to get engaged, stay engaged, and found it easier to lose engagement.

Similar to the issue regarding social studies classes failing to create connections to students and their lives, many social studies teachers have turned to lessons that overly use passive learning because of pressure and time constraints. With so many standards to meet, such large class sizes, and such little time to both cover the content and plan for it, many teachers are forced to turn to lectures, note-taking, and other forms of passive learning in order to meet all of the demands put upon them. As Anderson & Cook (2014) have noted, “Teachers often want to teach using powerful and purposeful social studies instruction, but numerous barriers exist” (p. 2). Thus, many of the problems that arise from unengaging social studies classes will continue as long as passive learning continues to be the preferred method used by teachers.

Finally, the third main reason many students find social studies classes unengaging is due to a focus on breadth of content coverage over depth of understanding. Many students struggle to engage with lessons because of the sheer amount of content being covered. With so much to learn, little to no time is devoted to exploring a topic on a deeper level. Being forced to stick to surface-level learning, students are unable to make deeper connections and are thus more likely to be bored or unengaged. Through their own action research project, Anderson & Cook (2014, p. 2) found “students need to be encouraged to think critically, to develop a deep understanding of core concepts rather than a surface understanding, and to have opportunities to connect to core values of democracy on a personal level.” With a focus on breadth over depth, students are denied this need.

Additionally, when introducing her own work on engagement in social studies classrooms, Gardner (2022) argues that “courses designed for deep inquiry have the potential to be more engaging for students than fast-paced, chronological survey courses and could offer a way for students to become reengaged” (p. 10). Essentially, a class focusing on surface-level learning will invite surface-level engagement. For a social studies class to be more engaging, it must not only allow, but encourage higher-level thinking and deeper analysis. Making classes that focus more on this will also be harder for students, but for many students this is a good thing. More rigorous and more challenging classes invite students to work harder and to grow more. Set the bar high and students will more often than not rise to the occasion.

I have noted a lot of these engagement issues within my own classroom. The classes I teach are very much run in a traditional method. Students show up, work on a warm-up activity, take some notes, and do a variety of different activities, such as working on a graphic organizer, reading an article, researching a topic and teaching a peer, doing a station rotation or gallery walk, etc. We use interactive notebooks as well. These methods have a lot of benefits for students; the consistency helps them know what to expect when they come to class, lessons are broken down in a way that is manageable for students, and we employ a lot of scaffolding and gradual release of responsibility to help set students up for success.

While there are certainly a lot of benefits to this structure, it is not perfect. Mainly, it can result in lower engagement for students. I have mainly noticed this by observing student body language and how they act in class. These behaviors are a good indication of how well students are engaged in class. During the vast majority of the lessons I teach, I have noticed that students seem very unenergetic. For example, earlier in the year I taught a lesson about the decolonization of Africa which was very note-heavy. Students did a good job writing down their lesson title and

essential question, and the beginning of the lesson, but as it continued, more and more students began to check out and stop paying attention. Eyes were glazed over, heads were in hands, and students began to sigh or grumble every time I revealed a new slide with notes. Fortunately, I have a great group of students, and they never complained or argued with me about these lessons. However, based on my observations, it was clear that their engagement was low.

In contrast, as part of this research project, I taught several other lessons with a focus on increasing engagement. I will go into more depth regarding these lessons later on in this chapter, but many of those lessons resulted in a clear change in body language and behavior. In contrast to the low energy of less engaging lessons, students came alive when they found the lesson to be more engaging. While these more engaging lessons didn't always guarantee better academic results, students still responded much better and with more energy.

These three factors I have noted - lack of connections to the lives of students, a focus on teacher-centered and passive learning, and the issue of breadth over depth - connect and intertwine with one another in many ways. A lack of connection, for example, can result from a focus on breadth and surface-level, passive learning. The good news is since these issues are interwoven in many ways, implementing a fix targeted towards one of them will also be highly likely to affect the others. Many of them have resulted from the same problems; a lack of priority for social studies in the minds of those at the top, diminishing resources and support for social studies teachers, and ever-increasing standards, content, and expectations to fulfill. Thus, in order to fully fix these issues, efforts have to be made by both teachers and administrators/ policy makers, which I will address later on.

Having outlined some of the causes of low engagement, for part two of this first theme, I can now answer the question posed in the introductory paragraph. Is it mostly the way the classes

are taught, the actual content covered in classes, or perhaps a mix of both? Based on the data I have analyzed, both from relevant research on the topic and on data I have collected from my own classes and students through observations, surveys, and discussions, it is clear the overall problem with social studies classes is not the content itself, but the way in which the content is presented.

When I was first brainstorming ideas for this project, the question that continued to puzzle me was why so many people found their high school social studies classes boring or uninteresting, but ended up developing an interest in the topic later on in their lives. This experience is shared by both myself and many people I have talked to. Until I took Drew Moneke's Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH) class, I had no interest in social studies. I just thought it was boring, and didn't understand why it would be important for me to learn. However, ten or so years later, I am now dedicating much of my life to teaching and talking about history every day. So how could I, like so many others, find social studies boring and then develop an interest in it later on in life?

The cause of this phenomenon can be traced back to not the content itself that is covered in social studies classes, but the way in which it is taught. Many people have a natural interest in social studies because it is the study of humankind. It is the story of us. Even for those who do not have this natural interest, the vast majority understand that history and social studies are important. However, because of the way social studies is taught in a traditional classroom, students do not have the opportunity to grow this interest. What is worse is that because these classes can be so unengaging, some students may have their fledgling interest stifled. As a result, they make a connection that social studies is boring because their experience learning about it

was boring. People understand the importance of this subject, but that is not enough to make it engaging for them.

As part of my data collection plan, I passed out a survey to my freshman students in the World Social Studies class that I teach. The focus of the survey was engagement. I presented students with different lesson types, such as lectures, research projects, and movies or videos, and asked them to note down which methods were most engaging for them. At the end of the survey, I wrote down several statements, then asked students to rate how much they agreed with each one, ranging from agree, slightly agree, neutral, slightly disagree, and disagree. Of the 52 surveys I collected, 44 students at least “slightly agreed” with this statement: “I understand why history/social studies is important.” While that isn’t a particularly large sample size, that is still roughly 85% of respondents claiming they at least slightly understand that history/social studies is important.

This number drops when students were asked if “I find social studies interesting,” with 37 students, or 71%, responding with at least “slightly agree.” This number decreases even further with the final statement, where 31 students, or just 59% of respondents, at least “slightly agreed” with this statement: “I enjoy the activities we do in class.” Currently, my class is run much like a traditional social studies class; students mainly learn through note-taking, reading articles, and watching short videos. While the vast majority of students understood that history and social studies are important, just slightly more than half said they enjoyed the activities they do in our class which uses traditional social studies instruction methods. The disconnect between the two is clearly visible.

Thus, the issue is well-established. Students find social studies classes uninteresting for a number of reasons, but the issue is mainly a result of social studies classes and teachers not

creating connections between the material and the lives of students, an overreliance on passive learning and teacher-centered instruction, and a focus on breadth of content vs. depth of understanding. Additionally, it is clear that the issue of low engagement comes not from the content itself, but rather the way in which the content is taught. Students understand the importance of the material, but that alone is not enough to fully engage them.

Engagement Alone Is Not Enough

After determining some reasons as to why high school social studies are unengaging for many students, the next step was to research different engagement strategies and to see which ones were most successful at increasing engagement. I found that the lessons which were most successful at meaningfully increasing engagement were lessons relevant to students, lessons which included opportunities for active learning, and lessons which allowed for student autonomy. Once I did this, however, I noticed an interesting theme emerge. To my surprise, making lessons more engaging for students did not always produce better learning outcomes.

While the main focus of this project has been on increasing engagement within classrooms, the ultimate goal of this was to help students improve academically. It is hard to learn and to grow when bored and unengaged. By studying engagement and engagement strategies, and applying them to my teaching, I aimed to see improvement in terms of student participation, motivation, and ultimately their academic performance. While I certainly didn't expect every student to magically do great with more engaging lessons, I did expect to see fairly consistent improvement across the board. However, after both reading research done by other experts in the field and assessing my own students' performance and improvement through formal and informal assessments, I realized my initial expectation was wrong.

Many experts have determined that engagement alone is not enough to produce better learning outcomes if student learning lacks meaning or application. In her own research project, Quarnitra Price (2020) explored how different teaching practices influenced student engagement and performance in high school social studies classrooms. Regarding the issue of engagement, she penned “Although students may retain the information and regurgitate it back on an exam, the learning is not meaningful if they cannot make a connection or apply what have been learned to their lives. Facts without application to life are irrelevant” (p. 8-9). This connects to both the first and second themes I have found in my own work. Even if a lesson is designed to be more engaging or fun for students, that alone is not enough to guarantee that students are actually learning better.

Price also discusses the importance of intentional lesson design. When designing a lesson meant to be more engaging for students, regardless of what engagement strategy is employed, the teacher must be intentional with their usage of engagement and must ensure that the lesson is still connected to learning objectives. She writes, “Accordingly, the better lessons are designed to engage student involvement in the competencies required to achieve learning targets and objectives, the more likely students will participate successfully with a broader base of curricular components... Lessons should be designed with intentionality for students to achieve high levels of engagement and maximum performance levels” (p. 19). In short, teachers must ensure that they are not designing their lessons solely for the purpose of being engaging. That engagement must have a purpose; it must be connected to learning objectives and must be actively encouraging and helping students learn better.

Summers & Dickinson (2012) came to a similar conclusion in their own work. The pair conducted a study between two high schools over a four-year period, with one school using a

traditional social studies curriculum while the other used a project-based instruction (PBI) curriculum designed to increase engagement and boost achievement. While the researchers ultimately determined that methods such as PBI did in fact improve engagement and academic achievement overall when compared to the traditional social studies class, they noted that the process was not smooth and actually saw lower achievement for some students. For starters, the initial data they collected seemed to indicate that students in the traditional social studies classrooms saw their learning outcomes grow more than the students in the PBI social studies classroom. “If we relied only on Chart 1” (which was the initial data they collected), “we would have concluded that Trad HS students’ social studies learning grew more than the PBI students over these four years of testing data” (Summers & Dickinson, 2012, p. 89). Because of the differences in the PBI curriculum, it took many students time to adjust, and the group as a whole initially grew less than the students in the traditional classroom did.

After getting through this initial hurdle, the researchers made some more observations. Many students in the PBI classrooms, specifically freshman, struggled with the more engaging instruction style. According to Summers & Dickinson (2012), “Many PBI HS freshmen disliked and/or did not trust the close peer–group instructional work inherent in PBI curriculum. Contract grading, which included peer enforcement of rules and peer assessment was an “undesirable,” “harmful,” and “forced peer–to–peer exchange” in the words of many PBI freshmen” (p. 94). As I mentioned earlier, making lessons more engaging often involves requiring students to do more in-depth thinking and less surface-level work. While this is a good thing, as students will more often than not rise to this new bar, when they are constantly asked to engage with this type of learning, it can be tiring or even frustrating.

Furthermore, several researchers have highlighted the fact that there is no clear connection between more engaging lessons and academic achievement. In their research regarding the connection between engagement and grades and student emotions, Bowles, Scull, and Jimerson (2022) noted “Student engagement, including issues of attendance, have been consistently linked with educational outcomes such as promotion to the next grade and grade point average... although a causal or linear relationship is difficult to establish” (p. 680). So, while the authors have noted the connection between engagement and achievement, they also noted that the connection is far more complicated than simply higher engagement=higher achievement. When not done intentionally, engaging lessons are not enough to boost learning outcomes and achievement.

Beyond the work done by the professionals, my own findings with my students also support this theme. To explore the pros and cons of more engaging lessons, I designed a number of them and used them in my classes. This included incorporating lesson types that students said helped them learn best, lessons that involved active learning, and lessons that connected with the personal lives of students. After completing a lesson, I assessed my students’ learning through a variety of formal and informal methods.

For the first lesson, I tried to design one with methods that students themselves claimed they found most engaging and helped them learn best. Returning to the surveys I collected, 40 out of 52 students, or about 77%, said that they learned best from lessons involving movies or videos. Thus, for one lesson in our unit focused on the Middle East, I had students watch a documentary about the Israel-Palestine conflict. The documentary focused on the lives of Israeli and Palestinian children living in Jerusalem, and told the story of the conflict through their lives and experiences. To measure how well they were learning, students were asked to complete a

handout which asked them a combination of surface-level thinking and deeper-level thinking questions. Additionally, after finishing the documentary, we had a short classroom discussion.

During the discussion, I asked a few questions to the whole class. Most students raised their hands and agreed when I asked them if they enjoyed the film or found it interesting. However, my classes as a whole struggled to answer the assessment questions on the handout. While students generally did better with the surface-level questions we discussed, most either did not answer the deeper-level questions or provided simple answers that did not go into enough depth. Even after our discussion, while grading this assignment later, I noticed the same problems had persisted. The assessment data suggests that while students did in fact find this activity more engaging, that alone was not enough to boost their learning outcomes.

Next, I borrowed a lesson from my cooperating teacher regarding different economic systems. For this lesson, students would simulate capitalism, socialism, and communism, with Starbursts serving as our currency and economic output. Before the simulation began, I had students complete a warm-up activity related to economic systems, then take some short notes to ensure they had the necessary background knowledge. The simulation had three phases, each corresponding with a different economic system. During each phase, students would play rock-paper-scissors and compete for their neighbor's Starbursts. After the end of each phase, I asked students some formative assessment questions to see how well they were learning about each system. Examples included: "Which system do you think is best and why?" "What are some pros and cons of each system?" "What would you change about each system to make it better?" Finally, at the end of the lesson, students responded to their choice of prompts in their notebooks, which I would later grade.

This lesson proved to be a hit with students. Engagement was some of the highest I have seen all year. Kids who normally did not participate in class became active participants, and some even volunteered to answer questions for the first time I could remember. Students smiled, laughed, and egged each other on. It was a very fun lesson for myself and for them. Having learned from the previous lesson where I had students watch a documentary, I made a more conscious effort to connect this lesson with learning targets. The purpose of the lesson was to teach students about different economic systems, what were some differences between them, and what were some pros and cons of each one.

So, did students learn what I wanted them to learn? Well, while this lesson was again more engaging for students, based on the assessments I conducted, there is no evidence to suggest that my students learned more from this lesson than they would from a more traditional one. One of the reasons for this comes from my own shortcomings when teaching this lesson. Since I did not have much experience teaching this type of lesson, I did not do a great job structuring this lesson and aligning it to the learning target. Had I been clearer about this during the lesson, students likely would have made more of the connections I was looking for.

Additionally, many of the same issues from the documentary lesson persisted in this lesson. Through the different assessments I used, students learned and remembered that they had fun during the simulation, and they remembered how they felt during each phase and remembered some basic differences between the phases. However, they weren't as proficient at making more in-depth connections between the different systems and their pros and cons. For example, when I asked students which system they thought was best, most of them said capitalism. But when I asked why, most simply shrugged or said "I don't know." When asked to justify their belief, students mainly defaulted to what they already knew or had been taught about

capitalism. While a few students were able to defend their beliefs based on evidence from the simulation, the majority did not make the connections I had been hoping for.

Thus, the data is clear. While trying to boost student learning and achievement through increased engagement is a good strategy, engagement alone is not enough to guarantee positive results. For the more engaging lessons to have the desired effect, strategies need to be targeted and intentional, and must be connected to learning and achievement objectives.

Which Strategies Work Best

We have now established some reasons why traditional high school social studies classes are so unengaging for students, as well as the fact that simply making lessons more engaging for students is not enough on its own to guarantee better learning outcomes and better academic achievement. For the third and final theme, I sought to find out how specific engagement strategies work and why they are successful. When being thoughtful and intentional with specific engagement strategies, it is clear that some of the ones that see the most success are when lessons were relevant to students, when learning was active rather than passive, and when students had autonomy in their learning.

As I determined earlier in this chapter, one of the reasons students found their history classes so unengaging was because they couldn't see how the material connected to them personally. With students being unable to connect with what they were learning about, their engagement, and a lot of the time their academic achievement, struggled. So, to make lessons more engaging for students in a way that helps them grow and learn is by ensuring that lessons are relevant to students and that students are able to see the connections between their own lives and what they are learning about.

Relevant research heavily supports this theme. Citing state social studies standards in her own dissertation on student engagement in social studies classrooms, Nelson (2016) explains “Social studies connects student thinking with real world contexts from local to global scales... when we can take our history and connect it to their everyday the lives-history becomes very real and applicable” (p. 13-14). When students are able to see the connections between the past and their lives, they are able to get more invested in the material they are learning. She also writes “in order for students to be successful in their educational journey, they must feel connected or passionate to what they are learning.” Again, social studies is the study of us. People have a natural interest in learning about themselves and others. Helping students see and make connections help them become more invested in what they are learning.

Social studies is more than just making connections to the past; it connects to the future as well. Turning back to Bowles, Scull, & Jimerson (2022), we can see that “More recently, research has shown that connection to school is strongly predicted by a commitment to an educational future” (p. 677). Essentially, students engage more when learning relates to their future. Additionally, for their conclusions section, the trio mention that “Establishing the relevance of curriculum material for different ages of adolescents would also be useful.” Helping students understand the relevance - the “why” of what they are learning - also helps them build connections.

I see plenty of evidence within my classroom as well. One thing I have noticed is talking about more recent or current events typically gets students more engaged than content further back in time. For example, during our Middle East unit, I dedicated a few lessons to the U.S. War on Terror. There was nothing particularly engaging about these lessons, but students were generally much more interested nonetheless. This was thanks to the fact they were able to

connect the material to their lives better. Learning about, say, the Fertile Crescent was not as engaging for students because they struggled to see connections to their own lives. However, events like 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror contain much clearer connections.

Additionally, students have given me direct feedback regarding their interest in more current and recent events. On the surveys I collected, I asked students to explain their general thoughts on history/social studies. One student wrote, “While I find most aspects of social studies like conflicts or relationships boring, sometimes the subjects we discuss can be interesting, especially recent events.” Another student asked for “more modern day examples on past problems. Apply history to nowadays.” Students don’t want to memorize dates or names; they want to make connections.

Another specific and targeted way to increase student achievement and learning through increased engagement is by using more active learning strategies and less passive learning. While passive learning is good for some aspects of lessons, it should not be the only way students are learning. Using more active learning is good for both students and teachers. With passive learning, much of the lesson is teacher-centered, and requires the teacher to therefore do most of the heavy lifting. By using more active learning, that weight is shifted more to the students, helping relieve some of the pressure on already overworked teachers.

Again, relevant research heavily supports this point. In her dissertation on project-based learning (PBL), Rubino (2024) highlighted the positives of engagement methods such as PBL that employ active, not passive learning: “Project-based learning (PBL) possesses characteristics that can encourage active participation and collaboration among students, thereby cultivating an environment conducive to engagement, improved learning outcomes, and student well-being” (p. 4). Essentially, this tells us that targeted engagement methods such as PBL that prioritize active

learning over passive learning have proven to encourage more participation and collaboration in classrooms, which itself contributed to higher engagement.

Active learning methods such as PBL, which promote active interaction amongst students, are also successful at targeted and intentional engagement because students can see their skills and learning improve. Rubino (2024) writes that PBL “offers preferable learning experiences compared to the direct learning method because it contributes to the development of essential skills as students increase their engagement with course materials” (p. 4). In this quote, the direct learning method in question is passive and teacher-centered learning. Students prefer active learning methods because it helps them notice their own growth.

Based on the feedback I received from the surveys I collected, my own students also prefer more active, hands-on learning. When I asked students to select different lesson types, and lesson types that help them learn best, students largely chose lessons that involved active rather than passive learning. 27 students selected discussions/debates and 28 students selected research projects as the lesson types that help them learn best. These two lesson types had the second and third most responses after movies/videos. In their comments, several students also mentioned that they both enjoyed and learned better with these types of lessons. One student noted that they found research projects “more interesting,” while another noted that they enjoyed simulations because “learning and experiencing” at the same time was “super helpful and fun!” When asked to select between active and passive learning, I have found that much of the time, students will choose the former.

For the final part of the third theme that has emerged during my research, a topic that frequently emerged throughout much of the existing research on the topic of engagement was student autonomy. This essentially refers to how much control and responsibility students feel

they have over their actions and education. When students have their autonomy restricted - as is the case in many traditional social studies classrooms, where learning is very teacher centered - they can feel less motivated and engaged. And on the contrary, research has shown that when students feel they have more control over their learning, they are more intrinsically motivated and more engaged as a whole.

Thomas & Nair (2022) provide some helpful insight into this specific aspect of engagement. They noted that too much teacher control over student learning can lower student autonomy, which in turn lowers engagement. In their study, they noted that one teacher's "careful attention to routines, monitoring of student conflict and regular check-ins may have come at the price of student autonomy" (Thomas & Nair, 2022). When a teacher exerts too much control within a learning environment, students can feel they have less control over their learning.

Furthermore, the topic of student autonomy heavily connects to student's search for connections. When discussing the learning environment, Thomas & Nair (2022) noted that students need "a safe, enabling space where 'they can form respectful relationships and derive a sense of meaning, connection, and control over their lives.'" This research suggests that people have a natural need to not only make connections, but also have some level of control over their lives. Having control and responsibility prompts investment and engagement.

A lot of my own students have also expressed a preference for lessons that allow for more autonomy. The class I teach is an entry-level class that all freshmen have to take and pass in order to graduate from high school. As a result of this, students from all ends of the academic spectrum are in the same classes. The class moves at a pace which is meant to balance the needs of the kids with higher academic achievement and the kids with lower academic achievement. Even so, many students find that the class moves either too fast or too slow for them. Thus, I

have worked to make accommodations for students so they can move at their own pace. For example, I always ensure that slideshows and lesson materials are uploaded on our class Canvas page. That way, students can always go back and check if they missed a part of a lesson, enabling them some autonomy in their learning.

In this chapter, I have established my research findings. I have analyzed and determined some reasons why high school social studies classes are unengaging, why increasing engagement alone doesn't always produce better academic results, and have gone over some specific, targeted engagement strategies and explained why they work. For Chapter 5, I will be reflecting on my work for this project; what went well, what didn't, and what conclusions I have arrived at.

Chapter 5. Discussions, Limitations, and Conclusion

The main purpose of this action research project is to determine why social studies classes fail to engage and impact students. Many of the techniques and approaches I used throughout this project regarding increasing engagement within my classroom were borrowed or inspired from existing research on the topic. For example, many of the research articles I cited, such as Nelson (2016), Summers & Dickinson (2012), Gardner (2022), and Rubino (2024) are focused on project-based learning (PBL) and project-based instruction (PBI). Rather than focusing on passive, surface-level learning, these techniques focus on active engagement and real-world connections. When trying to make lessons that were more engaging for students, I frequently attempted to design lessons that met this criteria of connection. I also found that making lessons meaningful for students, thereby lessons that students could connect with, were some of the most successful when it came to engaging students in a way that meaningfully impacted their learning.

While I did borrow many ideas from research regarding PBL and PBI, my own project was not entirely based upon these techniques, as many of the articles I researched were. Rubino's (2024) article, for example, was focused on whether or not PBL increased student engagement and other abilities when compared to more traditional strategies. Gardner (2022) also explored a similar topic, as she investigated how students experienced more engaging PBL lessons. Thus, much of the research I focused on was about PBL and PBI's impact or effectiveness. In contrast, my own work seeks to explore and explain some of the causes of low engagement, and then provide some examples of methods that do work when done properly. PBL and PBI were not the focus of my work; engagement was. For clarity, in this project, engagement refers to students' active participation in the learning process.

Another way my work differs from some other work in the field is that it analyzes and explains specifically why simply making lessons more engaging doesn't always guarantee better academic results for students. The research I have analyzed addresses specific practices or strategies in depth and explains why traditional social studies classes are unengaging for many high school students, but does not explore why lessons that are simply more engaging are not always effective. Existing research may explain that the strategy it is exploring successfully improves engagement and academic results, but does not touch on why these specific strategies are needed. If the goal is to increase engagement, why not just make classes more fun instead of employing a PBL or PBI curriculum, which requires a lot of effort on the part of both teachers and students? My research, however, adds to existing work by highlighting the importance of engagement that actively supports students' learning instead of just engagement that increases student interest or enjoyment

Limitations

Any action research project will face limitations, and mine was no different. When it comes to theory, I had planned to employ a combination of pedagogical theories, namely humanism, which focuses on the holistic development of a student as a person, and behaviorism, which focuses on conditioning certain behaviors. Humanism did end up playing a key role in my research. For example, one effective way of meaningfully increasing engagement that I found through my research was making what students were learning relevant to them, and allowing them to make connections to the material. This carries some strong connections to humanism - this theory is student-centered and focused on growing the student as both a person and a learner. Helping students make connections to the material and making the material relevant to them can help students grow as people.

While I ended up using many tenets of humanism within my work, my inclusion of behaviorism was ultimately not very significant to my research. As the project evolved, and I began to narrow down certain themes and plans for this project, I did not end up specifically using many of the core tenets of behaviorism. This implies that for future research, I should be more thoughtful and specific with choosing which theories to focus on.

Regarding methodology, there were several limitations. First was the length of the study. The data I collected from my students happened during the second semester of our school year, and will not continue into the future for the purposes of this project. Currently, I do not anticipate teaching these students again in the future, so this will be the end of my study. One semester is a fairly short period of time. When reviewing existing research on this topic, I noted that many studies were limited by their short duration. This is certainly a limitation with my own work.

Additionally, much of the data I collected from students came from the surveys they completed. An issue with these surveys is that the data is self-reported. Students might not fully understand themselves and their learning preferences; for example, the vast majority of students said they learned best and were most engaged when watching films/videos. Were my students able to differentiate between engagement and enjoyment? As self-reported data can be inaccurate, my usage of it also limits the potential of my research. This implies that in future studies, I should seek to increase the length of my study and use more concrete sources of data.

Finally, the practicality of this study also faces limitations. While my findings are certainly applicable to the classroom, given that it is focused only on high school social studies classrooms, it may not be as applicable to other content areas and grade levels. Furthermore, while I present several proven engagement strategies and explain why they are effective, I do not address how to incorporate them into the classroom. A teacher may find my findings helpful, but

may struggle to think of ways to include them in specific lessons and lesson planning. This implies that for my research to be more practical for more teachers and subjects, I have to explore the topic on a broader scale, not just focusing solely on which strategies work in high school social studies classes.

Conclusion

In this action research project, I explored the topic of engagement specifically within the high school social studies classroom. I analyzed why traditional social studies classes are failing to engage students - their failure to allow students to connect with the material, their overuse of passive learning, and their focus on breadth vs. depth - and why these problems continue to persist despite being fairly well-understood. I explored the role that engagement plays in student academic achievement, and how simply increasing engagement didn't necessarily guarantee better learning results for students. Finally, I explained how specific, targeted, strategies - making lessons relevant to students, employing more active learning, and allowing students autonomy in their learning - can improve both engagement and results. These themes and conclusions came from existing research on the topic and data I collected from my own students.

Based on existing research, my own research, and data I have gathered, it is clear as to why the average social studies class is unengaging for high schoolers. These classes have been slapped with the description of "boring" or "useless" because of several complicated and interconnected factors. Existing strategies used in many classrooms across the country have left students with negative impressions of history and social studies and have resulted in considerable harm to their learning and growth as students and human beings. Students and social studies as a whole deserve much better than what they are currently given. While changes will not be easy, they are necessary to ensure that students can learn and grow as unhindered as possible.

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