

Running Head: IT TAKES MORE THAN BOOKS TO INTEREST ME

It takes more than books to interest me: Increasing student interest in American history

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Context Paper

Long before there were pressures of teaching students to perform well on standardized tests, there were teachers who were inspired to teach students to love learning. This passion is still what brings many teachers into the field of education. Inspiring students to love learning is something that defines my teaching philosophy. However, the world of teaching has led to never-ending discussions focusing on paperwork and test-scores. Non-teachers and teachers debate over teacher and student accountability, tenure laws, standardized tests and content standards reform. But isn't one of the purposes of school to nurture a development of a love of learning? It seems that spending time nurturing the development of a love for learning has fallen by the wayside as other mundane responsibilities for teachers have been on the rise. I often wonder whether students are being encouraged to love learning amidst all of these changes to education. It seems that in all of the discussions over hot-topic issues that plague the news channels today, many people have not given time to look at the existence of nurturing a love for learning in our classrooms. To develop a love for learning within the youth of our society is what inspired me to become a teacher in the first place.

Reflecting on my social studies teaching career, I think I have found a missing piece which can make me a more effective teacher. As a teacher of eighth grade history in Westfield, New Jersey, I experience five different classes of thirteen to fourteen year olds throughout the school day. The class size ranges from nineteen to twenty-eight students. In a forty-minute period, over the course of 180 days, I am expected to teach my students the content and themes of American history from the time of exploration in the 1400's through the American Civil War. I must assist them in attaining the skills put forth in the core content standards of the state of New Jersey and

the Common Core Social Studies Standards (NCSS, 2013 & National Governors Association, 2010). I am expected to assess them in the beginning of the year to see their strengths and weaknesses in using evidence to answer analytical questions through writing argumentative essays about the time period and assess again at the end of the year to see how far they have grown. Somehow, in the middle of all of that, I feel it is my responsibility to nurture a love of learning American history. I believe that nurturing a love of learning American history can be done simultaneously with teaching students the necessary content and skills. Therefore, I want to find out **how to increase student interest in the American history content.**

Our American history curriculum is divided into different units. Each unit is designed through the use of an essential question with subsidiary questions. The essential questions are based off of the New Jersey Social Studies Core Curriculum Standards and are infused with the skills listed in the Common Core Standards, (NCSS, 2013 & National Governors Association, 2010). For example, our first unit poses the question: How do geographical and cultural interactions shape the development of a society? Within this unit, students are expected to evaluate information about our past, use the skills listed in the common core, and answer the essential question. This pattern repeats itself through six units chronologically covering the life of early Native Americans through the 1860's and the American Civil War.

By the end of grade eight, students are expected to understand the causes and effects of American historical events from a very wide range of chronological years. Because of this, every second of class time has to count. Similar to other units of study, although sometimes overlooked, there is no time to waste in the American history classroom. Keeping the time constraint in mind, sometimes it is difficult to get through so much content in such a short amount of time and make it interesting for the students. Students in my school complain about the dry topics of American

history. They often ask the question, “Why do we need to know this?” and “Why does this matter; it’s in the past!” For many children, it is difficult for them to understand why learning about themes, cause and effect relationships, and social changes in our country from as early as their existences are important to developing their character and ideas about citizen responsibilities. In my experience, I have noticed they turn themselves off to learning about early American history because they feel it does not matter. My goal is to help them realize how the content connects to their lives today.

I believe if students felt more connected to the information in the American history content, they will be more interested in learning. By being more interested, they will be more engaged. As many studies have shown, students will not only enjoy class more when they are engaged, but they will more likely retain the information taught in that particular class period (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Ultimately, I believe that if students are more engaged in learning American history, this will fuel their love for learning.

As stated before, the research question that will be studied is: How can I increase student interest in American history content? An overarching theme of this question is student engagement. Engagement can be defined in many ways. Student engagement is focused on increasing achievement, positive behaviors and a sense of belonging in school (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Because increasing student interest in American history content connects to engagement that has an array of definitions, many subtopics spring up including: motivation, meeting state standards, meeting core curriculum standards, kinesthetic learning, student choice, working with technology, and connecting the content to the real world, among others. The ultimate goal of this research project is for social studies teachers to be able to walk away with new ideas to implement in their classroom to increase student interest in the American history content.

It is important for history teachers to keep in mind where adolescents are in their development into adults. Developmentally, adolescents are struggling through stages of physical, emotional, social, and intellectual growth (Piaget, 1936). By eighth grade, many of them are just starting to see the world in more dynamics than just “awesome” and “awful,” (healthychildren.org). Students at this age are just beginning to think about hypothetical situations and how one event can have an affect on another (Piaget, 1936). This is another reason why teachers should value the power of interest in a topic. Adolescents are likely to make a quick decision regarding whether or not they like something which will result in them making a quick decision in whether or not they are going to pay attention to the information being presented to them.

Adolescents need to start learning how to be active citizens in society. In fact, according to the College, Career and Civil Life framework in which New Jersey teachers are being told to infuse the standards, teachers are responsible for helping students to understand citizens’ roles in society (NCSS, 2013). However, without presenting these life-long skills in an interesting way, many adolescents will not be engaged and therefore will leave eighth grade without realizing the importance of what they learned in eighth grade social studies class and how it connects to the real world. They also will not understand the responsibilities they have to be active citizens in their community.

In conclusion, I value my responsibilities as a social studies teacher very highly. My responsibilities are to teach my students the importance of American history, the patterns that arise throughout challenges and success stories of our past, and how it affects our future. It is also my responsibility to help my students understand and acknowledge the fact that they have a civic duty to be an active citizen in their community. They must leave my classroom knowing that when they see injustices, it is their job to try to do something about it. In order for me to achieve my

responsibilities as a teacher, I must use strategies in the classroom to gain the interest of students so they become more motivated to learn our curriculum. By tapping into students' interest, which includes making real world connections, I believe I will be a better teacher.

This research paper will first examine the literature that exists regarding important social studies content, best practice strategies for middle school students in social studies classrooms, and student interest and motivation. Then method of my study will be presented following by results. Finally, a well-thought out discussion will explain what I think the outcomes mean and how it has affected me as a teacher and the effect these changes have had on my students.

Literature Review

There are numerous studies that have been conducted in order to better understand the middle school social studies classroom. Some have looked at specific strategies that improve student engagement, while others have focused more on the difference in perspectives between the teacher and those being taught. There are a variety of sources available: articles in peer reviewed journals, blogs, articles in online websites, and surveys. These resources examine the social studies classroom from many different angles.

In order to understand how to increase interest in the American History classroom, the topics of history content, adolescent development, motivation and interest need to be further explored. These themes connect to the question because when looking into how to make a history classroom more interesting, the content needs to first be understood followed by an understanding of where the teenager is in their developmental stage. This will determine what students not only are capable of but also what they are interested in. Once the content and stage in development is understood, ways to motivate and interest students can be better articulated.

History content

Social studies at the middle level has been defined as being an, “integration of experience and knowledge about human endeavors and human relations designed to foster informed and ethical participation in society”, (NCSS Study, 1991). This coincides with many curriculums’ rationale, including the eighth grade curriculum of Westfield, New Jersey which states the purpose of the eighth grade social studies curriculum is to, “prepare students to be informed citizens” (Westfield, 2014). According to the National Council for the Social Studies, the history curriculum of grade eight should focus on the central themes of social and economic development while

emphasizing the personal side of history (NCSS, 1991). According to the New Jersey state standards for social studies, by the end of grade eight, students are expected to:

“Acquire the knowledge and skills to think analytically about how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage. Such knowledge and skills enable students to make informed decisions that reflect fundamental rights and core democratic values as productive citizens in local, national, and global communities.” (State of New Jersey D.O.E. 2010).

When 1,021 teachers were asked to name the most important reason for teaching social studies, they reported that nurturing critically minded reflective students is more important than teaching about historical facts and concepts (Leming et. al., 2009). Specifically, when asked to rate the reasons why teaching American history is important, in a study done by Leming, et. al., (2009), most teachers stated the most important reason was, “thinking critically about American institutions and society.” While the least rated reason was “learning about heroes and heroines in American history.” A sub division of the National Council for Social Studies conducted this study and it randomly surveyed 1,201 social studies teachers across America. Questions were asked about engagement, strategies, and purposes of social studies classrooms. The Leming et. al. (2009), findings coincides with the core content standards that emphasize articulation of an argument using evidence (National Governors Association, 2010).

Even though teachers agree that there is an important reason for teaching American history content, the fact that there is a lack of state testing of the social studies in most states provide a road block in the learning process. Many teachers reported social studies content being perceived as unimportant by students due to the fact that it is not tested at the state or national level (Leming et. al, 2009). In terms of state testing, United States history is the only section of history that is state tested in approximately fifty percent of schools. World history and economics are not tested at all (Leming et. al., 2009).

Even though the social studies content standards are not tested; the skills listed in the common core standards under social studies are tested: analyzing primary and secondary sources, writing a coherent response to an open-ended answer, etc. For example, according to the common core content standards, by the end of grade eight students are expected to write arguments focused on discipline-specific content and write informative/explanatory text including the narration of historical events (National Governors Association, 2010). This skill is not only taught in the language arts classroom but in the social studies classroom as well.

Strategies that connect to adolescent development

There are two schools of thought when it comes to best practice strategies for teaching adolescents. On one hand, teaching students study skills such as rote memorization and rehearsal of key information has been found to help students learn social studies content (Martin, 2007). Interestingly, the Martin (2007) study only included middle school students. On the other hand, providing opportunities for the student to make personal connections with the material through presentations or role-playing has also been shown to help students remember social studies material in classes between middle school and high school (NCSS, 1991).

In order to address the concern with self that adolescents feel as they develop their self-esteem and strong sense of identity, some research suggests using the following in the classroom: interest inventories, journals, independent research, student diaries and letters, biographies, performances, presentations and portfolios (NCSS, 1991). Presentations, that require role-playing, have been found to increase student interest and active participation (Hurst, 1976). By using these strategies, teachers can expect to see students developing skills to be lifelong learners and to communicate effectively (NCSS, 1991). Also, adolescents are very curious about the world and its people; many of them have a very vivid imagination (NCSS, 1991). Therefore, by using

strategies that allow adolescents to use their imagination and present the information they have learned, teachers can be helping adolescents become lifelong learners.

With that said, strategies designed to get the students thinking critically about the historical information might not actually be the preferred way of learning for some students. It appears that in a sampling of eighth grade students, students report that simply rehearsing the material and putting the material into their own words is the best way to study and learn the information (Martin, 2007). Some students actually prefer rote memorization because it is a familiar and functional strategy (Martin 2007). When one teacher was interviewed, he stated that he feels students prefer rote memorization because it takes less mental energy than higher-thinking activities such as using the material learned to create something (Martin, 2007). Presentations, for example, require students to use higher-level thinking strategies (Hurst, 1976).

Eighth graders are at a very unique stage developmentally. They are beginning to think reflectively about the material they are learning and develop their deductive reasoning skills (Allen, Splittgerber, & Manning, 1993). However, their writing and speaking skills are underdeveloped compared to high school students (Alexander, 2006). Students at this age are just beginning to think about hypothetical situations and how one event can have an affect on another (Piaget, 1936) According to one researcher, middle school students should be able to articulate what learning strategies work for them and help them learn (Martin 2007). In other words, they should be able to voice to their teachers the ways in which they learn best. Sometimes, they may mention strategies such as presentations, role-playing, rote memorization, or rehearsal of key information. Keeping this in mind, in the middle school classroom, time is of the essence. Taking time to teach students strategies that will help them remember more facts (i.e. rote memorization) may not leave a lot of time for incorporating activities that they are actually interested in (i.e. presentations and

performances) or vice versa (Martin, 2007 & NCSS Study, 1991). However, there is a balance to be found between exposing students to important historical content and using interesting strategies just for the sake of entertaining students (Sewall, 2000). Further, teaching the students one way might not help all students, therefore it is important to use a variety of strategies to try to reach all students.

Performances and presentations are not for all types of students. There are some students that may not like these types of strategies for a variety of reasons. In situations where students are shy, using a structured presentation would be more ideal – a presentation where they are presenting from a rehearsed script (Hurst, 1976). Further, for students who are classified as emotionally disturbed¹ sometimes demonstrate inappropriate behaviors (George, 2010). These behaviors can offset a smooth sailing lesson in any classroom, including social studies classrooms. They may not respond well to class assignments that put them on the spot or require them to present something in front of the rest of the class. One study found that strategies that require students to make a verbal or written response to a question proved to be beneficial for these types of students (George, 2010). The use of response cards is one way to increase the amount of time students engage in the material that is being presented to them; response cards can be answered in words or questions and can motivate all types of learners by eliminating the “embarrassment” factor of possibly sharing an incorrect response (George 2010). These types of students might also respond better to a teacher who they perceive care greatly about them for studies show that students are more likely to engage in classroom activities if they feel supported and valued (Wentzel, 1997). Feeling supported and valued is especially important for all students.

¹ Students referenced to as “emotionally disturbed” refer to students who have been diagnosed with the tendency to develop physical symptoms and fears associated with school who may also act inappropriately in social situations.

In general, strategies that incorporate cooperative learning increase have been found to increase student participation and involvement in the learning process in middle school. Cooperative learning strategies can include: group readings, group presentations, jigsaw activities, group projects, and debates. They have also been shown to enhance academic learning, heighten self-esteem, improve mutual concern and trust and increase the likelihood of positive social behavior (NCSS, 1991). When 220 eighth graders were asked what engaged them in social studies classes, they voiced they enjoy working with their peers because they are given the opportunity to talk to one another and hear each other's opinions and thoughts (Wolport-Gawron, 2012).

Developmentally, adolescents waver between a world where they want to have independence and a world where they need reassurance and care from their teachers. As part of the social-emotional changes that occur during adolescence, eighth graders are stuck between the desire for independence while still needing reassurance from their teachers (NCSS, 1991). Many of them will want to do their work by themselves, but may ask the teacher seemingly silly questions to make sure they are completing their work correctly. They respond best to teaching strategies they perceive have been created with care and concern for them in mind (Wentzel, 1997). Eighth graders are just starting to consider alternate possibilities, weigh multiple variables, and ponder abstract concepts such as justice (Piaget, 1936).

One report stated that it is very rare for social studies curriculum to be based on developmental insights (NCSS Study, 1991). One report states that students seldom see a connection between their lives and the lives of people in history (Hoonstein, 1995). However, seventh and eighth graders are good at deductive reasoning and reflective thinking especially if they can connect to the topic (Martin, 2007). When the connections between their lives and the history content are made, that is when the interest in the topic begins to spark (Wolport-Gawron,

2012). It is left up to the teacher to take the social studies curriculum and present it in a way that connects to the information we know about students developmentally.

Interest & Motivation

The adolescent interest level varies from topic to topic but one thing remains somewhat consistent. The topic of social studies has been rated least liked out of the core subjects in curriculum by students for years (Yell, 2011). In general, middle school students think the topics in history class are irrelevant and uninteresting to them (Hoonstein, 1995 and Yell, 2011). Since it is common knowledge that students learn better when they are actively engaged and interested in the topic, it is important for teachers to find out what is interesting and motivating to the students (Johnson, 2012). Johnson (2012) discusses the important connection between learning and engagement and specifically students taking ownership over their own learning because of engagement.

It is important for teachers to begin with what is familiar and interesting to the students, rather than beginning with abstract concepts outside their range of experience, understanding, or knowledge (NCSS, 1991). In fact, teachers are foolish to believe that students will want to pay attention to material that has no direct relevance or familiarity to their lives (Cutler, 2014). Students are also more interested in information when there is an opportunity for decision making, especially when the decision asks them to make a personal connection to the material. One way to do this is through the use of response cards that give the student a chance to answer a question that requires a decision from them (George, 2010). A response card is a small piece of paper given to students during class that requires them to answer a question before leaving class for the day. Gaining control of their own experiences and making personal connections through decision making in the classroom helps them create a sense of self-worth (NCSS, 1991). Another useful

strategy that helps students see connections to their lives is by showing them clips from movies with motives that are related to the motives of people in the past. For example, showing a clip of a greedy person in a modern day movie can be used as a springboard for discussing any greedy leader or conqueror in history (Cutler, 2014). Presenting the content in a relatable way sparks interest within the students.

In situations where teachers cannot change the curriculum, or re-write history, it is the teacher's immediate need to use motivational strategies in their daily planning and teaching. Without linkages and a sense of potential usefulness, students are unmotivated in social studies (Hoonstein, 1995). In one study, there were two strategies that students considered being the best motivators: role-playing characters in simulations and participating in group discussions (Hoonstein, 1995). Role-playing refers to either the student reading from a script of an historical event or the student improvising and acting something out related to the history content. When sixty eighth grade students from seven different middle schools were asked what strategies they would use to teach others about the historical topics in a motivating way through a questionnaire, they chose drama-related experiences, playing games for review, and infusing video and films into the teaching of the material (Hoonstein, 1995). This provides evidence that students are interested in the material when using those strategies. However, this might not be a good idea for students who are special education students or emotionally disturbed because they require students to be put on the spot that can be un-motivating (George, 2010).

Connecting the material to personal experiences can be used as a motivating factor. In one study, teachers expressed they believed using strategies that connect instruction to personal experiences is a strategy that increases student motivation (Hoonstein, 1995). Teachers also believe providing experience such as simulations, novels, and videos are motivating because it

helps students construct vivid mental images of the time period (Hoonstein, 1995). In order to make it even more motivating, it is important to provide a significant audience because sharing results of their work with others encourages quality and reinforces learning (NJCC, 1991). Therefore, according to the research, a motivating strategy for the social studies middle school classroom might be to ask students to act as part of a simulation in front of an audience of teachers or other classes. Further, if the students perceive the teacher cares about them and their learning, they will be even more motivated to do a good job (Wentzel, 1997). One study found that there is a direct correlation between perceived caring from teacher and academic effort (Wentzel, 1997). Therefore, a successful motivating strategy might be to have the kids perform a role-play or presentation in front of teachers who they perceive care about them.

There are a variety of other strategies that are thought to increase student interest in class material. Bringing in visuals, allowing for student choice, effectively using technology, involving the students in hands-on activities, and letting adolescents work together have all been defined as strategies to increase student interest and engagement in class material (Wolport-Gawron, 2012). Starting class off with a puzzling story or asking students to develop an inquiry are also useful strategies to increase student interest (Yell, 2011). Sometimes, the student-drive inquiry can help the student investigate. Teachers should be careful not to propose very broad inquiries such as, “Is war ever justified?” because questions like that cannot even be answered by professionals, (Sewall, 2000). Infusing the reading of primary sources instead of simply reading from the textbook is another strategy to increase student interest in social studies (Yell, 2011 & Sewall, 2000). All of these strategies have been used by educators and have been shown to increase student interest in the social studies classroom.

Conclusion

The research surrounding the question, “How do I increase student interest in American history content?” has proven to hold information regarding why the subject is so important. Implications from the research conclude that students do not feel history class is important and interesting (especially because it is not a tested subject in New Jersey). Therefore, they are uninterested in the topic and less willing to buy into learning about the content. However, ironically enough, the teaching of history is changing. With a recent push for students to not just memorize various information regarding history’s heroes and heroines, students now are learning how to be active citizens in their community. The core social studies standards, core content standards, and C3 framework are all designed to demand students to be able to articulate how changes in society occur over time and to know how to make changes in the future.

According to different researchers and authors, making the history content relatable, familiar, and connecting it to the students’ lives are the focus in making history interesting to students. When students can connect themes, motives, and mistakes made in the past to the present day, that is when the interest is sparked – that is when the students buy into the material. The research also concludes there are particular strategies to use to engage adolescents in class material. These strategies can be used in any content course, not just social studies. Infusing technology, allowing students to work cooperatively, and using kinesthetic activities can all increase engagement. This research suggests that using these strategies combined with connecting the material to students’ lives should result in a highly interesting lesson for adolescents.

One tension remains: social studies content is not tested on the state level, nor is it tested on college acceptance tests. Because of this, the class of social studies is pushed to the side in the schools. Extra time is devoted to math and language arts, but rarely (if ever) given to social studies

classes. Also, the fact that social studies content is not tested implicitly influences students and their families to believe that it is not as important as the other subjects. Often times, social studies teachers are influenced to think their content and purpose is not as valuable in their school. However, just because it is not a tested subject area does not mean that it is not important. In fact, the skills developed in social studies such as analytical writing and communicating arguments are tested on state tests. As previously stated, there is a strong push for social studies curriculums to now prepare students to be active and knowledgeable citizens. Some can argue that this is one of the most important and valuable lessons of all.

Methods

Study Objective:

The objective of this study is to determine what strategies and content make social studies class interesting to eighth grade students within the parameters of the curriculum and state standards. For the purpose of this paper, student interest is defined as a feeling of wanting to learn more about something. Over the course of a seven-week study, I collected various data to answer questions regarding the content, levels of student interest in content and levels of student interest in the teaching strategy used.

Sample

In order to study how to increase student interest in American history, students currently taking American history needed to be observed and used as a sample. Therefore, I compiled a sample of fifty-three students from my current roster. The fifty-three students were enrolled in Early American History, the eighth grade general education history class at Roosevelt Intermediate School. One of the fifty-three students is classified as emotionally disturbed. This class is a general education class. The students ranged in age from age thirteen to fourteen. There were 32 girls and 21 boys. Three of the students were classified students requiring moderate modifications that range from copies of notes to advanced notice of assessments. None of the three require an in-class-support teacher for social studies.

The fifty-three students were the students in my sixth and ninth period classes. I chose to study these two classes because the timing of the classes allowed me to more conveniently collect data. The timing of sixth and ninth period allowed me to journal and survey students before class and after class, as needed. After sixth period, I have a prep period that allowed me to journal, take notes, and reflect on the lesson that just occurred. Similarly, ninth period is the last period of the

day. This allowed me to journal, take notes, and reflect with an unlimited amount of time at the end of the day.

The sources of data for this study were: the curriculum, student surveys, lesson plans, my journal, and exit slips. I will explain the method of each source of data along with how each source of data provided information to help answer the question of how to increase student interest in American history after I explain the overview of the research process.

Research Process

Over the course of seven weeks, I implemented a variety of teaching strategies to teach four different concepts: the goals of the Preamble, the three branches of government, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution. Each concept was taught over the course of a few days. The teaching strategies were designed based on past practices and input from the students (through a survey). A complete list of the strategies used will be listed under the Lesson Plan data source.

After each concept was taught, the students completed an anonymous exit slip that asked them questions regarding what they found interesting during the lesson. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected through these exit slips. Other data sources used were: student survey, curriculum standards, lesson plans and my journal. The goal of the research was to determine which concepts and which strategies the students found interesting in social studies class. Each source of data and the method in which it was collected will now be discussed.

Data Sources and Data Collection

Curriculum Standards

One source of data used for this study was the Westfield social studies curriculum. The social studies curriculum was written based on two sets of standards. The core curriculum content standards were developed by the New Jersey State Department of Education (Appendix A) The

Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects were developed in 2010 by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers (Appendix B). The purpose of using the curriculum and standards as a data source is to determine what I am obligated to teach my students during the course of the study.

During the course of this study, the students were learning information from unit three of the curriculum. The essential question of this unit is: “How are individuals responsible for and able to protect the ideals of our democratic government?” Throughout the duration of the study, I was responsible for teaching my students the goals listed in the preamble of our constitution, the responsibilities of each branch of government and the importance of the Bill of Rights. I was also required to assess the students using a document based question: Does the Constitution guard against tyranny? A complete list of subsidiary questions, vocabulary, and content outline of this unit can be found in Appendix C.

Survey

In the first week of the study, students were given a survey with a series of questions using Likert scales. This survey, which will be explained in detail, was used as a tool to determine student interest levels in various strategies that would be used throughout the seven-week period of study.

Students were asked “What teaching/learning strategy do you feel keeps your interest the best? If you rate something a 6, that means you feel the strategy keeps your interest the best. If you rate it a lower number, it means you feel the strategy does not keep your interest. 6 is the most interesting and 1 is the least interesting.” The categories were document based questions (argumentative essays), presentations (both teacher and student), reading and answering questions, projects, etc. A complete list can be seen in Appendix D.

Students answered the survey questions using iPads during the last ten minutes of class. One student was absent during the survey. Student responses were kept anonymous in an effort to motivate the students to be completely honest.

Lesson Plans

Based on the students’ answers to the aforementioned online survey, I developed lesson plans using various strategies for the concepts covered during the study. Each concept coordinated with a variety of strategies. Four concepts were included in the study, each taught with different teaching strategies. The four concepts that were included in the study were: The Preamble of the Constitution, The Three Branches of Government, The Bill of Rights, and the Constitution. These concepts came straight from the Westfield Social Studies Curriculum (Appendix C). The teaching strategies were chosen based on best practices I had developed over the years mixed with the responses from the students in the survey previously mentioned. The following chart gives an overview of the concepts and the teaching strategies that were paired up with them (Figure 1). For a complete explanation of each lesson, please refer to complete Lesson Plans in Appendix E.

Concept from Curriculum	Teaching Strategies Used
The Preamble	Students tried to solve a puzzle together related to the Preamble, reading comprehension check, current event individual project (students were required to relate the goals listed in the Preamble to current events)

Three Branches of Government	Let's make a date role-play activity, Prezi presentation (similar to online powerpoint), reading comprehension, class discussions of which branch has the power to do certain things, discussions with connections to modern day
Bill of Rights	Students were required to choose one of the ten amendments in the Bill of Rights and create a presentation or movie that exemplifies the importance of the amendment.
Tyranny	Using evidence to support claim to answer question: Does the Constitution guard against tyranny? Students were given background information, four documents, and a pre-writing organizer.

Figure 1: Summary of lesson plan for the four concepts taught during the study.

Journal

Observations were taken in the form of journaling throughout the study. The purpose of journaling and writing down observations was to track how interested students seemed in the lesson. During the study, I committed to hand writing in my journal twice a week. Occasionally I wrote more often. I took notes at specific times, either when students seemed particularly bored or interested in the topic they were learning on a specific day. I wrote notes on what seemed to be going well, what seemed to not be going well, and what I may think about changing the next time I taught the lesson. I wrote specific students' names down when their behavior, engagement, or questions stood out. I also wrote down how I felt to try to keep track of if I had better days when my students' found the lesson more interesting. The journal entries should help to see which students were interested in the lessons and which students appeared to be bored.

Exit Slip Surveys

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a series of exit slip surveys the students completed after finishing each concept from the curriculum mentioned before.

Therefore, students received exit slips regarding the concepts of: the preamble, the three branches of government, the Bill of Rights, and tyranny and the Constitution. The purpose of these exit slips was to determine what the students found interesting. The same exit slip survey questions were used each time. At the top of the survey, I listed the concept and the strategies used to teach the particular concept to help students remember the strategies used for each specific concept. The same four questions were:

- 1) On a scale of 1-4 how interested were you in today's lesson?
- 2) What interested you? What didn't interest you?

The exit slip surveys were completely anonymous and students were encouraged to be completely honest. The exit slips were collected from both classes and kept in a folder. The students had the last five minutes of class to complete each of the four exit slips they received. An example of an exit slip can be found in Appendix F.

The student responses to the exit slips should provide insight as to what concepts and strategies the students find interesting that were used in class. They will be coded based on emergent themes.

Data Analysis Plan

All of the data compiled from the curriculum standards, survey, lesson plans, observations, and student exit slips, I hope to be able to answer the research question of how can I make social studies interesting for eighth graders. In the next section of this paper, Data Analysis, I will analyze and interpret the data to determine what concepts and strategies the students find interesting and which ones bore them. I plan to determine what strategies and concepts the students found interesting through coding the exit slips. With the quantitative data from the Likert scale on the exit slips, I will create a frequency chart displaying the levels of interest in each of the four concepts

taught over the course of the study. I will code the students' open-ended responses with emerging themes. I will then create a chart that displays frequency of emerging themes from the students' written responses on the exit slips. I will compare my observations with the students' responses on the exit slips to see if I was able to correctly determine if the students were interested in the topic or strategy we were using for a particular lesson. All of the data and then findings will be discussed next.

Findings and Analysis

In order to better understand the interests of my eighth grade students in history class, I collected data over the course of seven weeks. As previously discussed, data was collected in the following ways: surveying students, consulting curriculum standards to develop lesson plans, student exit slips, and my own journal.

Survey Results:

In order to teach lessons that are representative of the curriculum in a way the students found interesting, I conducted a survey to see what types of pedagogical strategies the students found interesting. To clarify, fifty-three students (one student was absent) were asked: “What teaching/learning strategy do you feel keeps your interest the best? If you rate something a 6, that means you feel the strategy keeps your interest the best. If you rate it a lower number, it means you feel the strategy does not keep your interest. 6 is the most interesting and 1 is the least interesting.” Although the students were asked to rate every strategy, some left a few of them blank. Three categories were filled in by fifty-two students (one of the fifty-three students was absent on the day of this survey), three were completed by fifty-one students, one category was filled out by fifty students, and three categories were completed by forty-nine students. The following charts display the results from the question about student interest in various teaching/learning strategies (Figure 2).

Data: Student Interest in Strategies								
		1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Teaching/ Learning Strategy	<u>Teaching the class a topic</u>	<u>3</u> (6%)	<u>8</u> (15%)	<u>15</u> (29%)	<u>11</u> (21%)	<u>15</u> (29%)	<u>0</u>	<u>52</u>
	<u>Debates/Discussions</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>2</u> (4%)	<u>6</u> (12%)	<u>14</u> (27%)	<u>19</u> (37%)	<u>11</u> (21%)	<u>52</u>
	<u>Reading and answering questions/taking notes</u>	<u>11</u> (22%)	<u>10</u> (20%)	<u>13</u> (25%)	<u>7</u> (14%)	<u>9</u> (18%)	<u>1</u> (2%)	<u>51</u>
	<u>Prezi Presentations</u>	<u>3</u> (6%)	<u>5</u> (10%)	<u>14</u> (29%)	<u>10</u> (19%)	<u>16</u> (31%)	<u>4</u> (8%)	<u>52</u>
	<u>Video Clips/Visuals</u>	<u>1</u> (2%)	<u>1</u> (2%)	<u>8</u> (16%)	<u>9</u> (18%)	<u>13</u> (26%)	<u>18</u> (36%)	<u>50</u>
	<u>Group Projects</u>	<u>6</u> (12%)	<u>4</u> (8%)	<u>7</u> (14%)	<u>8</u> (16%)	<u>11</u> (22%)	<u>13</u> (27%)	<u>49</u>
	<u>Individual Projects</u>	<u>4</u> (8%)	<u>7</u> (14%)	<u>10</u> (20%)	<u>11</u> (22%)	<u>12</u> (24%)	<u>5</u> (10%)	<u>49</u>
	<u>Document Based Question Essay</u>	<u>30</u> (61%)	<u>6</u> (12%)	<u>8</u> (16%)	<u>3</u> (6%)	<u>1</u> (2%)	<u>1</u> (2%)	<u>49</u>
	<u>Preparing for/Studying review games</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>3</u> (6%)	<u>3</u> (6%)	<u>13</u> (25%)	<u>15</u> (29%)	<u>17</u> (33%)	<u>51</u>
	<u>When current events or pop culture is related to course content</u>	<u>2</u> (4%)	<u>5</u> (10%)	<u>3</u> (6%)	<u>10</u> (20%)	<u>18</u> (35%)	<u>13</u> (25%)	<u>51</u>

Figure 2: Pre-Survey results from students displaying interest in various teaching strategies.

As evident from the statistics above, students perceived themselves as very interested in the following top three topics: preparing for/studying for review games, debates and discussions, as well as when current events or pop culture is related to course content. The three strategies which were rated the least interesting were: teaching the class a topic, reading and answering questions/taking notes and the document based analytical essay.

In the following chart, the sums were taken from the high interest level columns ([level 4, 5, and 6](#)). [If a student rated something a four or higher, they](#) perceived themselves as [generally more interested in the lesson due to the six-point scale](#). The strategies are listed in the chart from greatest [student](#) interest to least (Figure 3).

Students' Ratings of "Highly Interested"		
		Number of Students that Rated High Interest
Teaching/ Learning Strategy	Preparing for/Studying review games	45 (87%)
	Debates/Discussions	44 (85%)
	When current events or pop culture is related to course content	41 (80%)
	Video Clips/Visuals	40 (80%)
	Group Projects	32 (65%)
	Prezi Presentations	30 (58%)
	Individual Projects	28 (56%)
	Teaching the class a topic	26 (50%)
	Reading and answering questions/taking notes	17 (34%)
	Document Based Question Essay	5 (10%)

Figure 3: Pre-Survey results; listed from most interesting to least interesting.

The data from the survey will be further discussed in the Discussion section of the paper.

After the students completed this survey, I proceeded to teach them about four different concepts: the preamble to the constitution, the three branches of government, the Bill of Rights, and tyranny. Within each of these concepts that were taught to the students over the course of seven weeks, a variety of the teaching strategies listed above were used. Over the course of the seven-week study period, I took notes in my journal regarding class participation and engagement.

Data from my journal

I wrote in my journal at least twice a week over the course of the seven-week time of study. Within my journal entries, I took notes on how interested the students seemed in the lessons. At first I was not looking for anything specific. I simply wanted to react to what I had seen in class. However, over the first few weeks I noticed some emerging themes: These different themes were evident in my observations: engagement/participation, and questions from students (Figure 4).

Theme	Key Words
Engagement/Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students were involved • Students were participating in teaching strategy • Students were laughing • Student saying “this is fun!” • Student saying “this is boring!”
Questions from Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students asking how historical content connects to today • Students asking higher-level thinking questions regarding the content (i.e. “But why did the Founding Fathers want to do that in the first place?” • Students staying after class to ask questions
My Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I laughed with the students today • I’m frustrated that the kids aren’t getting it • I’m in a great mood today • I’m happy with the lesson today

Figure 4: Data: themes found in my journal throughout length of study.

These three themes were evident in the writing of my journal over the course of the seven week study. It appears that in most cases, my emotional feelings that day were tied to how the lesson went in my history classes. For example, on days when the students appeared to be bored and not engaged, I did not feel good about the lesson. On days that I felt great, the students appeared to be engaged in the lesson. This possible correlation will be further explored in the Discussion section.

Data from Exit Slips

After each concept was taught to the class, students completed an exit slip. There were four exit slips total. The concepts taught were: the preamble, the three branches of government, the Bill of Rights, and tyranny. The first question on the exit slip asked students to rate their interest in the strategies used to teach each concept. The following chart represents the quantitative data collected from the first question on the exit slip (Figure 5):

<u>Interest in Strategies Used for Each Concept During This Study</u>						
		<u>1</u> <u>(least)</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u> <u>(most)</u>	<u>Total</u>
<u>Concepts</u>	<u>The Preamble</u>	<u>3</u> <u>(6%)</u>	<u>15</u> <u>(29%)</u>	<u>33</u> <u>(62%)</u>	<u>1</u> <u>(2%)</u>	<u>52</u>
	<u>The Three Branches of Government</u>	<u>1</u> <u>(25)</u>	<u>7</u> <u>(15%)</u>	<u>32</u> <u>(68%)</u>	<u>7</u> <u>(15%)</u>	<u>47</u>
	<u>Bill of Rights</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>9</u> <u>(18%)</u>	<u>29</u> <u>(59%)</u>	<u>11</u> <u>(22%)</u>	<u>49</u>
	<u>Tyranny/Constitution</u>	<u>10</u> <u>(21%)</u>	<u>21</u> <u>(44%)</u>	<u>13</u> <u>(27%)</u>	<u>4</u> <u>(8%)</u>	<u>48</u>

Figure 5: Exit slip survey results from Likert scale rating of interest.

After rating their interest in a particular topic using a Likert scale on the exit slips, the students were then asked to describe specifically what they found interesting and what did not interest them. Students’ responses to this open-ended question ranged from some students describing which strategy interested them to what specific topic interested them. For example, some students described how they enjoyed the role-play activity in class while others explained that they were interested because the topic applied to the modern world.

There were four emerging themes determined from the open-ended responses to what the students were interested in. These themes are: historical content, interacting with others,

acting/performing, and real-life connections. The following chart lists examples of key words used to code the students' responses into different categories (Figure 6).

Theme	Key Words
Real-life Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's important to know for life. • This applied to today. • It's important for us to know • It connects to our lives
Interacting with Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with others • Group members were funny • I love group work • Others entertained me
Acting/Performing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loved the role play • Acting was so fun • The skit was really fun • I loved making the movie
Historical Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I liked looking at the historical documents • Interesting to see changes over time • Interesting to see what they were thinking

Figure 6: Themes found within exit slip responses.

The data collected from the second question on the exit slip speaks volumes to what the students were really interested in and what they liked about the lesson. They wrote down specific strategies that interested them. For example, one student wrote, "I was so interested in seeing my classmates act out the skit. It was so entertaining!"

Some of the themes that came out of the students' exit slips have a direct relation to the strategies asked about in the pre-survey. For example, students wrote about how they were interested in the lesson because they had the chance to work with others. This connects to the strategy of group work and discussions/debates. Another example is the students spoke about real-world connections. This is correlated with the students' interest evident in the pre-survey regarding current events and pop culture. These connections will be further explored in the Discussion section.

The Discussion section will look deeply into the connections between the various types of data collected over the seven-week period of study. These data sources were: survey, my journal, and students' exit slips. The discussion section will explore how the data from the sources are connected and whether or not there are any correlations.

Discussion

Four emergent themes were common throughout the feedback given from students through one of the questions on the exit slips in regards to their perceived reasons for their interest levels. They are: interest in the content relating to their lives today, interest in interacting with others, interest in acting and role-playing and interest in historical content. Each of these themes will be examined in relation to other data sources: the pre-survey that questioned what strategies they are interested in at the start of the study, my observations throughout the study, and the Likert scale ratings on the exit slips. Some of the themes that emerged from the students' comments appear to be connected to one another.

Interest in the content relating to their lives today

In the pre-survey given at the start of the study, 80% of the students rated “when current events or pop culture is related to course content” as highly interesting. This teaching strategy was rated among the top four strategies that interested students.

The strategy of connecting course content to the students' lives was used to teach three of the concepts during the study. Students were required to find current events that display the six goals of the preamble during the lesson on the preamble (64% high interest based on first question of exit slip). In the three branches of government lesson, modern day examples of our country today were used to teach the students the importance of the responsibilities of each branch (83% high interest). Lastly, in the Bill of Rights lesson, students were asked to act out modern day examples of our rights given to us in the amendments (81% high interest).

For each of these concepts, the students' feelings of interest and the observations and feelings noted in my journal support the idea that students were interested because the lesson was connecting to their lives. Various students mentioned in the exit slips that they were interested in

the part of the lesson that spoke about the modern day. For example, one student wrote, “The part of class where we acted out the Miranda rights was interesting because it applies to today.” In my journals, I mention multiple times that students asked questions regarding the current government. I felt this displayed their interest in the topic because they were actively thinking about the material and wondering how it applies to the world around them.

The fact that students perceived these instances as interesting is not surprising. Previous research has discovered that when students can make connections to the history content they are learning, they are likely to be more interested in the lesson, (Hoonstein, 1995 and Wolport-Gawron 2012). Developmentally, eighth grade students at age thirteen are in the formal operational stage (Piaget, 1936). This means that they are able to think about hypothetical scenarios. Therefore, they were capable of thinking about “what if” situations in regards to the historical content. For example, in one lesson students were asked to consider what if the first amendment didn’t exist? Wolport-Gawron (2012) suggests students are very interested in hearing other students’ opinions. I think this added another element to their interest levels in the historical content that incorporated connecting the material to the modern day.

Interest in interacting with others

In the pre-survey that students completed at the beginning of the study, two of the categories encompassed interacting with others: discussions/debate and group projects. 85% of students rated discussions and debates as being highly interesting. Discussions and debates were the second highest rated strategy, rated just beneath preparing for/playing review games. Preparing for and playing review games also requires interacting with others, but it was not one of the strategies used during this study. Group projects were rated highly interesting among 65% of the students. Group projects were in the middle of the rankings, number five out of ten.

The strategies of debates and discussions and group work were both used in teaching the following concepts: the three branches of government and the Bill of Rights. In the three branches of government lesson, students worked together to determine which branch of government was responsible for certain things. For example, the students had to work together to determine which two branches of government are responsible for appointing a new justice to the Supreme Court. In the Bill of Rights lesson, the students spent class-time discussing which rights are most important. In the same lesson, students took part in a group project that required students to work together to write and act out a script that displayed one of the rights in action. The students chose their own groups. The three branches of government lesson earned an 81% high interest level while the Bill of Rights lesson earned an 83% interest level on the Likert scale from the exit slips.

For each of these lessons, students made comments on their exit slips that, again, matched what I was perceiving and writing down in my own journal. Students mentioned that they had fun working with one another. One student wrote, “I loved working with the group – we should do this all the time!” Many students mentioned that they loved having the discussions about the rights. For example, one student wrote, “It was interesting to listen to everyone’s perspective on the second amendment.” In my journal, I wrote down that the students seemed very interested in the lesson and many students were participating. I noted that in small groups, even the quiet students were voicing their opinions and they were able to voice their interest in the topic.

Cooperative learning strategies and having the chance to interact with other people is something that adolescents, in general, seem to enjoy (NCSS, 1991). Middle school is a very social time for most teenagers and it makes sense that they would enjoy having time in class to talk to each other and work with each other. From my perspective as a teacher, the time they have to learn from each other is very important. However, when students are left alone to work with one another

it is time that is not completely structured. In my experience with this study, it is during that time that students sometimes get off topic. One strategy I used to keep distractions at bay was by physically checking in with each group during the group projects on the Bill of Rights and asking students about their progress and their goals for the next day. I would stop by each group and ask for a report on their progress and goals for the next day. I felt that this helped keep them on task.

Interest in acting and role-playing

In the pre-survey students completed at the start of the study, there was not a specific category that encompassed acting and role-playing. However, this strategy was used to teach two concepts: the three branches of government and the Bill of Rights. Acting and role-playing, for the purpose of this study, involved students taking on the persona of someone else and acting out an event in history or a hypothetical event. During the three branches of government lesson, students volunteered to act out the “The Dating Game.” The basis of this script was a bachelor looking for love and each of the three contestants represented one of the branches of government. During the Bill of Rights lesson, students worked in groups to write their own skits to display one of the amendments in action; then they acted out their skit in front of the class. As stated previously, the three branches of government lesson earned an 81% high interest level while the Bill of Rights lesson earned an 83% interest level on the Likert scale from the exit slips.

The comments from the exit slips regarding acting and role-playing truly expressed how interested the students were. “I loved acting out our amendment, I really enjoyed it,” one student stated. Another student stated, “I absolutely loved the role-playing. It made the branches so much more interesting.” Many students wrote similar comments specifically mentioning the role-playing and acting portions of the lesson. The students’ perception of being interested matched the writing

in my journal. On the days they were participating in the acting and role-playing activities, my writings included comments of students seemingly being interested in the lesson.

The acting and role-playing strategies were both activities which encouraged student interaction and cooperative learning. Therefore, I believe the students were very much interested in the Bill of Rights lesson and the three branches of government lesson because it combined both acting and interacting with others that the students specifically stated as interesting strategies in their exit slips. Other research agrees that cooperative learning can greatly interest students, (NCSS, 1991). As stated previously, students in this study stated they were very interested in being able to interact with other people. The acting and role-playing parts of the lessons in this study naturally lent itself to the ideal cooperative atmosphere for the students who enjoy this type of learning environment. There were some students, particularly the shy students, who preferred to work alone.

Interest in the historical content

There was no specific strategy that the theme of “interest in the historical content” fit into, though it is embedded in each of the strategies used to teach the students all four concepts: the preamble, the three branches of government, the Bill of rights, and tyranny. On some of the exit slips, students directly wrote about whether or not they liked the historical content even though there was no specific question about it. There were a few students who made specific comments about genuinely being interested in the course content. For example, one student stated in regards to reading about what the framers of the constitution debated over, “It’s really interesting to see what the writers were thinking back then.” Another student stated, “I thought it was interesting to learn about the disagreements people had in the 1700’s.” However, the majority of students who mentioned the content mentioned it in a negative way stating things like, “this subject is not interesting at all,” and “history does not interest me.”

This evidence suggests that, just like in many aspects of schooling, some students are genuinely interested in the subject of history while others are not. Based on the findings from this study, it appears that as a history teacher there are certain strategies that can increase student interest but it will not reach every student in the room. There are also students in the room who do not seem to need strategies that increase student interest to interest them in the content because they are naturally curious about American history.

What did not interest students?

All of the strategies discussed so far were strategies that interested the majority of the students. However, the strategies of promoting interaction between students, acting and role-playing, and having debates and discussions did not work for every single student. In fact, out of each of the four times I collected the exit slips, there was at least two students that rated the lesson a 1 even though the majority of their classmates rated it a 3 or a 4. Further, each time I collected the exit slips, there was at least one student (perhaps the same student each time) who wrote, “Nothing interests me about history.” Related, there were some students who found the “interesting” (as rated by their classmates) lessons boring because they did not like the strategy that was being used. For example, there were students who wrote “I hated acting out our skit, so I don’t think it was interesting.” Perhaps these students worried about being embarrassed in front of their peers and might be emotionally disturbed. This coincides with the findings of George, (2010) who researched a correlation between middle school students classified as “emotionally disturbed” and non-engagement in the social studies classroom due to the fear of embarrassment. This reminds me that there is no “magic” lesson which is going to interest all of my students at the same time. It inspires me to be conscious of using a variety of strategies in my classroom to try to meet every student’s interests over the span of an entire unit.

Reading and taking notes on historical content and writing essays that require students to look at various primary and secondary sources is a skill which is required for students to master by the end of grade eight (National Governors Association 2010). However, in the pre-survey, students rated “reading and answering questions/taking notes” (only 34% highly interesting) and the “document based question essay” (only 10% highly interesting) as the least interesting strategies. This rating proved itself to be true throughout the duration of this study. Students mentioned that they were specifically not interested in reading and taking notes on any topic throughout the study. This might be due to the fact that reading and taking notes is a non-social learning environment, the opposite of what the majority students stated they enjoyed. The document based question essay was something that almost all students rated as not interesting. Students explained that they do not like having to read the documents and write an argumentative essay. On the days that students were writing their essay, I specifically wrote in my journal, “students seem extremely bored and stressed.” This means that students in general, in this study, were not interested in the specific strategies geared towards meeting the core curriculum standards. Perhaps if teaching the argumentative essay in history can be paired with teaching in language arts classes, students might feel less stressed when it comes to writing the actual essay.

Implications

Based on the data collected from this study, I believe that there is a balance between using strategies that are highly interesting and strategies that are very strongly connected to the common core standards (but may not be highly interesting) to teach the same concepts effectively. There was a range of teaching strategies used to teaching the four historical concepts of the preamble, the three branches of government, the Bill of Rights, and the concept of tyranny. Students were most interested when the lesson did one of three things: connected to their life, involved interacting

with others, or required them to act something out. They were least interested when they were asked to: read and answer questions, read primary and secondary sources, and write an argumentative essay based on tyranny. Using multiple strategies to teach the same concept seems to be the best bet in teaching American history to eighth graders. If a concept can be taught which requires them to use skills in the common core (such as reading and analyzing a document) and requires students to interact with one another, then it would be an effective way to teach students.

There was also a very clear connection between two of the strategies that is noteworthy to share with other educators. In this study, the strategy of discussions and debates connects to the strategy of connecting the material to the modern day. The students noted they were interested in discussions and debates – but in the lessons that were taught it seemed that they were most interested in these particular debates and discussions because they connected to the modern day. This suggests students might be very interested in multiple strategies if the teacher can find a way to connect the material to the students' lives.

To conclude, this study has shown that students are most interested in lessons that require them to interact with each other, act something out, and/or have a strong connection to their lives. It is very possible to use these strategies in the history classroom, as I have done in this study. These strategies are strategies that other studies have also proved to be effective in teaching history (Martin, 2007 & NCSS Study, 1991). If other history educators are experiencing students who appear to be uninterested in the course content, they should consider using more strategies in their classroom that promote student interaction, acting out skits, and connection to the modern day. Hopefully other history educators in my teaching department can learn something from the findings of this study. This will be discussed further in my Implementation Plan (Appendix H).

Limitations

Many of the limitations of this research project existed because of my job as a teacher in Westfield, New Jersey. One of the main limitations is that the majority of my students already come to class ready to learn. As described in the context portion of this research, I teach in a very affluent school district where school is highly valued among most families. Therefore, students are coming to class prepared and ready for the lesson. The pressure to succeed in school starts in the majority of the homes of the students in my classes. Also, students generally get along resulting in a very comfortable learning environment where students feel safe. The Westfield environment of highly valued education and a safe learning environment is a wonderful place to teach. However, this is a limitation of this particular study because most of these types of students do not really need all the bells and whistles to interest them in a lesson. Most of them take school seriously and are ready to learn even if the learning strategy is perceived as boring to them.

Another limitation of this study, which is also related to my job of a teacher, is the fact that during this research project I was a full-time teacher. The creation of lessons, collection of data, and analysis of data were part of my responsibilities on top of my daily responsibilities of being a teacher. During a normal day, I had forty minutes with the students who were part of the study. I had to teach the students the curriculum, which happened to be part of this study, but my time to observe them while teaching them was affected. To clarify, I wanted to sit back and observe them taking part in one of the lessons, but I was not able to because I also had to be their teacher. Students asking questions, announcements made over the intercom system, students entering and leaving my room, etc, often sidetracked me. The responsibilities of researcher and teacher could not be separated in this study that limited the amount of data collection I could conduct.

The school's schedule also led to another limitation in my study: state testing. I had originally planned on having seven straight weeks to conduct this study. However, the state testing

was approaching right after the seven weeks were completed. Because the state testing was new to our school, our students needed to be trained on how to take the test. Due to this, I lost two full days of history content because I had to bring my students to the computer lab to teach them how to take the test. I also lost one period on one day due to students being pulled out of my classroom to attend a grade level meeting. Another way the state testing affected this study was I was not allowed to use the laptops in my classroom because they were all being worked on to prepare for PARCC testing. Therefore, I could not plan any lessons that involved the students using laptops.

The state testing was not the only cause of scheduling conflicts during the seven weeks of the study. The winter season snow affected a total of four days during the study period. Our school was shut down for one full day and delayed for three days, thus affecting the amount of time I had with my students. On the days with delayed openings, I only saw my students for half of the normal amount of time. This kept me from adding one more lesson into the study for a total of five different lessons instead of four.

Further, because I conducted this study after four months of already getting to know the students, I knew their personalities well enough to plan lessons which I thought would be successful. It would have been interesting to see which strategies did not interest students at all, but my responsibilities of a teacher limited me to using strategies that I believed would be successful. To clarify, I could not purposely use a perceived non-interesting strategy just for the sake of the study because my responsibilities as a teacher were more important. The issue of knowing the students led to my subjectivity in planning and understanding the findings of this study which will be further discussed under *Subjectivity* (Appendix G).

Future Questions

While I was conducting this study, there were some questions that came up over the course of the seven weeks. There were times where I came across something during one of the data collections that I really wanted to look into further, but I had to stay on the course of the path I had set out for the study. For example, when the students really enjoyed the Let's Make a Date three branches of government activity, I wondered if the students would have been interested in creating their own script for the activity using the vocabulary words from the unit. There were even more questions that came up after I analyzed all of the data.

One of the questions that came up after analyzing the data was: How does this connect to academic achievement? Further, is there a correlation between long-term memory and high interest? I am extremely curious about this connection. I would assume that if students were highly interested in a certain lesson, they might be more likely to retain the information longer. I was not able to collect data on this because the students performed so highly on the assessments for the units. It would be interesting to conduct a survey at the end of the school year that asks students specific questions about content. I would be very interested to see if they remember more content from the high-interest rated concepts and remember less from the concepts they rated as least interesting.

“How can I make teaching the least interesting skill interesting to students?” is a question that has been on my mind throughout this entire study. Going into the study, I knew that the document based essay is something that students, in general, despise. The eyes roll, the sighs get loud, and the questions always shoot at me, “Why do we have to do this?” The truth is the students have to learn how to write an effective argumentative essay by the time they leave grade eight because it is required by the common core standards. They have to be able to read, interpret, and analyze primary and secondary sources in order to answer a question based on the historical

content we are studying. This study has given me some insight into ways that I could possibly make this teaching strategy more interesting. What if the document based essay question connected to their lives? This is a topic I will definitely be exploring in the future.

Impact on students

This research project had a direct impact on my students' educational experience. My research project required me to try new and interesting teaching strategies. The data from the exit slips proved that the students enjoyed the teaching strategies used over the course of the seven weeks. I think the students were more interested in learning American history over the course of the seven weeks than they had been all year. This inspires me to continue to use new and exciting strategies (such as having them act a historical event out in front of the class) throughout the rest of my professional career.

I think my research project also positively impacted my students in a different way: the students felt empowered because they knew their opinion mattered. Every time I gave the students an exit slip to fill out that required their opinion on how interesting they thought the lesson was and what specifically they were interested in, I could tell by their body language, questions, and comments that they felt like they were proud to share their opinions. It is very important for my students to know that I care about their opinions and preferences and I try to communicate that message with them throughout the year. This research process gave me the opportunity to tell them that their opinion matters to me in a very formal way. I think the students really appreciated that.

Some of my students asked me questions as they were filling out their exit slips with information about the various teaching strategies used. One question that was asked was, "What are these used for?" I explained to the class that I was trying to use teaching strategies to make

them more interested in American history. As the end of the research process arrived, I told my students that the data I collected from their exit slips was instrumental to my final research paper. The students seemed extremely thrilled about this. They asked if I quoted any of them, if their opinions meant anything, and they also asked what I discovered. I was taken back by how interested they were in the outcome of the research process. It proved to me that they were definitely happy to be part of something big. A few of the students expressed that they actually wanted to read my research paper.

In general, I noticed a positive change in the classroom culture of the two periods that were part of this research study. I developed a sense of high respect for my students and I felt this respect emanate from them as well. Because we took part in fun learning activities over the course of the research study, we were able to laugh with each other, learn with each other, and enjoy ourselves in the history classroom environment. I predict this sense of closeness will continue throughout the school year, especially because I plan on continuing to use new and interesting teaching strategies. I know that I will never forget these two groups of students because of my research project and I hope that some of the students will hold on to memories from our class as they continue on their path of education.

Conclusion

Months ago I came up with the idea of conducting a research project on increasing student interest in American history. It was driven by my own experiences in the social studies classroom. I felt that too often students were complaining about history being boring and they were not as engaged in the history lessons as they were in other classes. My feeling of wanting to interest students in something which I view as an important part of being an American citizen is what carried me through the entire research process. I am proud to say that at the end of it, I truly do

feel that I have evidence that supports certain strategies that can be used to interest students in the content of early American history.

I have learned that there are ways to teach the required materials (mandated by the state and the town through standards and curriculum) through strategies that the majority of students find to be interesting. One very important finding from this study is that there is no “magic” lesson that will interest all of the students at the same time; therefore I must vary the types of teaching strategies used in hopes to reach the interest of all of the students over the course of an entire unit. I hope that through this study and through the lifetime of teaching I have ahead of me, I can inspire students to love learning.

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Appendix A

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards

Standard	6.1 U.S. History: America in the World: All students will acquire the knowledge and skills to think analytically about how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage. Such knowledge and skills enable students to make informed decisions that reflect fundamental rights and core democratic values as productive citizens in local, national, and global communities.		
Era	Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)		
Grade Level	By the end of grade 8		
Content Statement	Strand	Indicator #	Indicator
<p>3. A. Civics, Government, and the New Nation</p> <p>Disput over political authority and economic issues contribute to a movement for independence in the colonies.</p> <p>The fundamental principles of the United States Constitution serve the foundation</p>	A. Civics, Government, and the New Nation	6.1.8.A.3.a	Examine the ideals found in the Declaration of Independence, and assess the extent to which they were fulfilled for women, African Americans, and Native Americans during this time period.
		6.1.8.A.3.b	Evaluate the effectiveness of the fundamental principles of the Constitution (i.e., consent of the governed, rule of law, federalism, limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, and individual rights) in establishing a federal government that allows for growth and change over time.
		6.1.8.A.3.c	Determine the role that compromise played in the creation and adoption of the Constitution and Bill of Rights.
		6.1.8.A.3.d	Compare and contrast the Articles of Confederation and the United States Constitution in terms of the decision-making powers of national government.
		6.1.8.A.3.e	Explain how and why constitutional civil liberties were impacted by acts of government (i.e., Alien and Sedition Acts) during the Early Republic.
		6.1.8.A.3.f	Explain how political parties were formed and continue to be shaped by differing perspectives regarding the role and power of federal government.
		6.1.8.A.3.g	Evaluate the impact of the Constitution and Bill of Rights on current day issues.
<p>B. Geography, People, and the Environment</p>	B. Geography, People, and the Environment	6.1.8.B.3.a	Assess how conflicts and alliances among European countries and Native American groups impacted the expansion of the American colonies.
		6.1.8.B.3.b	Determine the extent to which the geography of the United States influenced the debate on representation in Congress

of the United States government today			and federalism by examining the New Jersey and Virginia plans.
	6.1.8.B.3.c		Use maps and other geographic tools to evaluate the impact of geography on the execution and outcome of the American Revolutionary War.
	6.1.8.B.3.d		Explain why New Jersey's location played an integral role in the American Revolution.
C. Economics, Innovation, and Technology	6.1.8.C.3.a		Explain how taxes and government regulation can affect economic opportunities, and assess the impact of these on relations between Britain and its North American colonies.
	6.1.8.C.3.b		Summarize the effect of inflation and debt on the American people and the response of state and national governments during this time.
	6.1.8.C.3.c		Evaluate the impact of the cotton gin and other innovations on the institution of slavery and on the economic and political development of the country.
D. History, Culture, and Perspectives	6.1.8.D.3.a		Explain how the consequences of the Seven Years War, changes in British policies toward American colonies, and responses by various groups and individuals in the North American colonies led to the American Revolution.
	6.1.8.D.3.b		Explain why the Declaration of Independence was written and how its key principles evolved to become unifying ideas of American democracy.
	6.1.8.D.3.c		Analyze the impact of George Washington as general of the American revolutionary forces and as the first president of the United States.
	6.1.8.D.3.d		Analyze how prominent individuals and other nations contributed to the causes, execution, and outcomes of the American Revolution.
	6.1.8.D.3.e		Examine the roles and perspectives of various socioeconomic groups (e.g., rural farmers, urban craftsmen, northern merchants, and southern planters), African Americans, Native Americans, and women during the American Revolution, and determine how these groups were impacted by the war.
	6.1.8.D.3.f		Analyze from multiple perspectives how the terms of the Treaty of Paris affected United States relations with Native Americans and with European powers that had territories in North America.
	6.1.8.D.3.g		Evaluate the extent to which the leadership and decisions of early administrations of the national government met the goals established in the Preamble of the Constitution.

Appendix B

Core Content Standards

English Language Arts Standards: History/Social Studies

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.3

Identify key steps in a text's description of a process related to history/social studies (e.g., how a bill becomes law, how interest rates are raised or lowered).

Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.5

Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6

Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8

Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.10

By the end of grade 8, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 6-8 text complexity band independently and proficiently

English Language Arts Standards: Writing

Text Types and Purposes:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1

Write arguments focused on *discipline-specific content*.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.A

Introduce claim(s) about a topic or issue, acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.B

Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.C

Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.D

Establish and maintain a formal style.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.E

Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2

Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2.A

Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories as appropriate to achieving purpose; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., charts, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2.B

Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2.C

Use appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2.D

Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2.E

Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2.F

Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.3

(See note; not applicable as a separate requirement)

Production and Distribution of Writing:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.5

With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.6

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas clearly and efficiently.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.7

Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.8

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.9

Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Range of Writing:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.10

Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Appendix C

Westfield Curriculum: Unit 3

Unit 3- Philosophical and Political Foundations/ Establishing a New Nation

Essential Question: How are individuals responsible for and able to protect the ideals of our democratic government?

Subsidiary Questions:

- What conditions are toxic/ nurturing to a democratic society?
- What political concepts influenced the development of democratic principles in the new nation?
- What documents establish democratic principles in the new nation?
- What are the democratic principles established by the Constitution?
- How does New Jersey demonstrate the development of democratic principles in the new nation?
- How does our democracy promote individual responsibility and participation within our society?
- Does democracy diffuse or inflame conflict?
- What responsibilities are given to the government and individuals in a democratic society?
- What limitations are placed upon the government and individuals in a democratic society?
- How are individual rights and the common welfare balanced in a democratic society?
- How are the obstacles to equality dealt with in a democratic society?

Vocabulary

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| a. Constitution | r. Liberty |
| b. Execute | s. Representative government |
| c. Bill of Rights | t. Tyranny |
| d. Economic depression | u. Unconstitutional |
| e. Legislative branch | v. Judicial Review |
| f. Executive branch | w. Impeach |
| g. Judicial branch | |
| h. Compromise | |
| i. Republic | |
| j. Separation of Powers | |
| k. Federalism | |
| l. Checks and Balances | |
| m. Amendment | |
| n. Due process of law | |
| o. Justice | |
| p. Domestic tranquility | |
| q. General welfare | |

Content Outline

- I. Early foundations of democratic principles
 - a. Ancient Greece
 - b. Ancient Rome
 - c. Magna Carta (1215)
 - d. English Bill of Right (1689)
 - e. *Treatises on Government* by John Locke (1690)
 - f. *On the Spirit of Laws* by Montesquieu (1748)
 - g. The League of Iroquois Nations
- II. American foundations of democratic principles
 - a. The Declaration of Independence
 - b. The Articles of Confederation
 - c. The Constitution of the United States
 - d. The Bill of Rights
- III. The major principles of the Constitution
 - a. Shared Powers
 - b. Separation of Powers
 - c. Checks and Balances
 - d. Separation of Church and State
 - e. Federalism
- IV. American citizen interaction with our government
 - a. The rights and responsibilities of American citizens
 - 1. Obeying laws
 - 2. Paying taxes
 - 3. Serving on Juries
 - 4. Voting in local, states, and national elections
 - 5. Conflicting rights and responsibilities
 - a. Major conflicts, resolutions, and benefits that have arisen from diversity/suffrage
 - 1. Land and suffrage for Native Americans
 - 2. Civil rights (i.e. Martin Luther King)
 - 3. Women's rights
 - b. Basic contemporary issues involving the personal, political, and economic rights of American citizens
 - 1. Voting rights
 - 2. Habeas corpus
 - 3. Rights of the accused
 - 4. The Patriot Act
 - 5. Dress codes
 - 6. Sexual harassment
 - 7. Fair trial
 - 8. Free press
 - 9. Minimum wage

Appendix D

Survey Questions

1. On a scale from 1 (not important) to 6 (extremely important), please rate how important it is for you to learn about this topic in the 8th grade. If the topic is something that seems extremely important to know in the 8th grade, rate it higher. If it seems like something that is not important for you to learn in 8th grade, rate it lower.
 - a. Articles of Confederation
 - b. Bill of Rights
 - c. Amendments
 - d. Constitution
 - e. Democracy
 - f. Three Branches of Government
2. On a scale from 1 (not interested) to 6 (extremely interested), please rate how interested you are in learning about each topic/concept. If the topic is something that seems extremely interesting to you, rate it higher. If it does not seem interesting to you, rate it lower.
 - a. Articles of Confederation
 - b. Bill of Rights
 - c. Amendments
 - d. Constitution
 - e. Democracy
 - f. Three Branches of Government
3. What teaching/learning strategy do you feel helps you remember information the best? If you rate something a 6, that means you feel the strategy is extremely effective. If you rate it a lower number, it means you feel the strategy is not as effective. 6 is the most effective and 1 is not effective.
 - a. Document Based Question
 - b. Teaching the class a topic
 - c. Prezi Presentation (including writing down some notes with a partner)
 - d. Reading and answering questions
 - e. Individual projects
 - f. When current events or pop culture is related to course content
 - g. Group projects
 - h. Video clips/visuals
 - i. Debates/discussions
 - j. Preparing for/Studying for review games with prizes
4. What teaching/learning strategy do you feel keeps your interest the best? If you rate something a 6, that means you feel the strategy keeps your interest the best. If you rate it a lower number, it means you feel the strategy does not keep your interest. 6 is the most interesting and 1 is the least interesting.
 - a. Document Based Question

- b. Teaching the class a topic
 - c. Prezi Presentation (including writing down some notes with a partner)
 - d. Reading and answering questions
 - e. Individual projects
 - f. When current events or pop culture is related to course content
 - g. Group projects
 - h. Video clips/visuals
 - i. Debates/discussions
 - j. Preparing for/Studying for review games with prizes
5. Are there any types of teaching/learning strategies you wish to see in history class in the future?
- a. Movie projects
 - b. Current event projects
 - c. Formal debates
 - d. Other

**Appendix E
Lesson Plans**

Concept	The Preamble
<p>Objective</p> <p>Standards</p> <p>Learning Experiences</p>	<p>Students will be able to connect each goal of the Preamble to something that our government is currently doing to protect Americans.</p> <p>6.1.8.A.3.a-g, RH 2-4, WHST 1, 2, 4</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) A puzzle is put in the front of the class that spells out the preamble in license plates. Student work together to read through the preamble. 2) Through a mini teacher lecture (5 minutes), students are introduced to each goal of the preamble. 3) Students view the School House Rock music video of the Preamble. They are encouraged to sing along. 4) Students individually read explanations and examples of each goal of the preamble. 5) Students discuss modern day examples of how the Preamble’s goals are still active in today’s government. 6) Individual Project assigned: Students find two current events and describe how the goals of the Preamble are still active. This is completed at home.

Concept	The Three Branches of Government
<p>Objective</p> <p>Standards</p> <p>Learning Experiences</p>	<p>Students will be able to apply the responsibilities and jobs of each branch to situations and determine which branch has the power to handle the situation.</p> <p>6.1.8.A.3.a-g, RH 2-4, 7, 9, WHST 1</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students first access their prior knowledge during a class discussion on what they remember about each of the branches of government from their 7th grade history class. 2) Students individually read the roles and responsibilities of each of the three branches: executive, judicial, legislative. 3) Four students perform a skit in front of the class with a script. The skit was developed by me and follows the idea of the Let’s Make a Date show. One bachelor(ette) asks three contestants questions about why he/she should date them. Each contestant represents a different branch of government and drops clues and hints throughout the skit. At the end, the class determines which contestant is which. 4) Students complete a Who’s Who worksheet in which they use the iPads to research who is currently serving in each branch of government. A note sheet is provided for them and they have to fill in the blanks. Students worked in groups of three. 5) Students worked in pairs to complete an activity that challenged them to look a situation and determine which branch of government has the power to handle it. For example, A new justice is appointed to the Supreme Court. Answer: Executive and Legislative, President appoints them but the Senate must approve.

Concept	The Bill of Rights
<p>Objective</p> <p>Standards Learning Experiences</p>	<p>Students will be able to understand the role of citizens in practicing their rights given to them under the Bill of Rights.</p> <p>6.1.8.A.3.a-g, RH 2-4, 9, WHST 6, 7, 9</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students will understand the need for the Bill of Rights, as per arguments made by the ant-federalists in the 1780s after reading primary source quotes. 2) Students will individually read each of the ten amendments and think about their significance. 3) Students will choose their own groups in class. They will then choose one of the amendments to portray to teach the rest of the class the importance of the amendment and how some people abuse it. 4) Students will work on this project during class-time and will present them in the form of a presentation or a movie.

Concept	Does the Constitution guard against tyranny?
<p>Objective</p> <p>Standards Learning Experiences</p>	<p>Students will be able to articulate three reasons that back up their claim statement that answer the question in a four to five paragraph essay using parenthetical citations.</p> <p>6.1.8.A.3.a-g, RH 1-10, WHST 1-10</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students participated in class discussion on whether or not the Constitution guards against tyranny 2) Students analyzed four primary and secondary sources that can be used as evidence to answer the question 3) Students created an evidence chart to visualize how the answer can be written in two ways 4) Students conducted an in-class written essay to answer the question

Appendix F
Example of Exit Slip

Lesson on: The Preamble of the Constitution

Strategies: Current Event Project, License Plate Puzzle, Song, Reading Comprehension

1. On a scale of 1-4 how interested were you in today's lesson?

1

2

3

4

2. What interested you? What didn't interest you?

Appendix G

Subjectivity

If you took me out of this research project, the study would not have taken the same course. My thoughts, my preferences, and my feelings are hidden within each step of the research process causing this study to be very subjective. That does not mean that the findings are not legitimate, it just means that every teacher research project is subjective in some way or another simply because they are part of it. This study on increasing student interest in early American history is not an objective one, simply because I am part of it. The study is subjective because of my history of being a student and my preferences as a teacher. Through the entire study I have learned that the person that I have grown to become greatly affects the type of teacher I am.

The fact that I am interested in learning new things affected parts of this study. Throughout my years of school, I distinctly remember enjoying going to class. Still today I enjoy learning new things. Because I am genuinely interesting in learning, I subconsciously want others to enjoy learning as well. There are people in my life that I feel never really enjoyed learning; nothing ever interested them in school. Part of me feels sorry for them because I feel like they missed out on something. The idea of wanting to spark my young students' interest in wanting to learn stems from my own personal feelings. People could argue that student interest in history content does not have to be a priority over learning the meaty content of the curriculum. However, I want the students to have an interest in learning new things. I would love for them to develop a passion of learning and it would be a bonus if they feel passionate about the historical content of the curriculum.

Although I feel I was born with the curiosity of learning new things, there were a few teachers I met along the way that fueled my passion for learning and influenced my teaching style.

In general, my fondest memories of schooling are from the classrooms where learning was fun and interesting. My middle school history teachers greatly influenced the teaching strategies I use today in my middle school classroom. The format of in-class games, the desire to connect the material to the modern day, the sense of teaching citizenship responsibilities all stem from the history teacher I had for two and a half years of my three years of middle school. Another history teacher I had used to always use easy to understand metaphors and analogies to describe seemingly complex historical policies. These two teachers not only fueled my passion for learning but I find myself using the same teaching strategies they used to teach me years ago. The teaching strategies used in this study were subjectively chosen because they were indirectly influenced by the teachers who taught me.

Another reason why this study was subjective is because I decided what teaching strategies to use. The teaching strategies that were chosen were strategies that I prefer for one reason or another. There are a vast amount of effective teaching strategies for middle school students; I used the ones that interested me and/or that I already had success with. This means I was biased in choosing the teaching strategies. For example, the teaching strategy of having the students create a scene to demonstrate their amendment was a strategy which I have used for the past three years; I knew it was a strategy that students seem to really like and it is one of the projects students ask about when entering my class in September. I thoroughly enjoyed the days that encompassed this project because I got to have fun with the students while they were learning through viewing their trial runs, providing feedback, and sharing good ideas.

A very specific example of this type of subjectivity involved the role-play lesson on the three branches of government. As I was walking past a co-worker's classroom one day, I overheard the role-play activity unfolding in her classroom. As I watched, I noticed how interested the

students appeared in the lesson. I met with the teacher later on to find more information out about this role-play activity and she helped me adjust it to fit the needs of my classroom. This strategy became part of the study because I thought it would really interest my students; I was right! This is an example of how my experiences as a teacher directly affected the choice of strategies used in this study.

From conducting this research project, I have learned a great deal about myself as an educator and the impact I can make. I have learned that time to reflect on successes and challenging situations in and outside of the classroom is extremely important. Being able to sit still and think about how to improve, what went well, and the potential impact I have the ability to make on my students are all vital parts of my journey of growth as a teacher. Looking back at how my former teachers have had such an impact on my life, it is evident that I have the potential to possibly influence my students' lives. Through this entire research process, I have reconfirmed the feeling that the most important part of teaching, to me, is to inspire kids to love learning. My whole research process revolved around trying to interest students in the classroom. Conducting this study was important to me because I proved to myself that I highly value students' interests and care deeply about their learning.

Appendix H

Implementation Plan

After conducting this study, it is very important to me that the findings create some sort of a change. I personally feel that after putting months into researching the topic of increasing student interest in history, I must use the findings to better my own teaching and hopefully influence others as well. The findings suggest that there are three themes of strategies that the majority of eighth grade students feel are interesting: making real-life connections, interacting with others, and acting and role-playing historical events. These teaching strategies can be used to spark the interest of students who may view history as a boring subject or a subject that is not important (compared to tested subjects). A smaller majority of students were also simply interested in the historical content that is important to note as well. The findings of this study will not only directly affect my teaching styles for next year but will also be shared with my department, the language arts department, and I hope to submit to a teaching journal in the future.

By conducting this study, I have learned there are ways to interest students in American history content. I am going to use these strategies immediately in my classroom. I have learned that students are interested in different types of things, so using a variety of strategies can be extremely beneficial in increasing student interest in the content. Therefore, I plan on using a teaching strategy related to each theme at least once per unit in my lesson plans so that I can try to interest every body at least once every unit. There are six units in our eighth grade history curriculum. I have two units left to teach this year and I plan on using the strategies that have been studied during this research project to teach my students. For example, the next unit involves teaching the students about immigration to America in the 1800s. In order to interest the students who found the “interacting with others” theme interesting, I am going to incorporate group

activities and an activity with the other history classes. In order to interest the students who found the “making real-life connections theme” interesting, I am going to incorporate information on modern-day immigration to America and how it relates to the earlier immigrants of the 1800s. These are just two examples of the ways I will incorporate all of the themes of strategies into the next unit that I am teaching. This pattern will continue throughout the planning of all of my lessons.

Sharing my findings with coworkers is also something that I plan on accomplishing in the near future. I think the findings from this study are not only important for the social studies department, but also important for the language arts department. I plan on reaching out to my supervisor to ask her if she would like me to present at our next social studies department meeting or our conjoined department meeting with the language arts department. By sharing the findings with other social studies teachers, they can think of new ways to make teaching the history content interesting for students who appear uninterested. By sharing the findings with the language arts department, I hope to work together with them when it comes to the document based question that the students are responsible for writing. My findings suggested that the document based question was the least interesting teaching strategy to the students and yet writing an argumentative essay in history class is one of the most important standards for the students to achieve. Perhaps the language arts teachers and social studies teachers can team up and use the same argumentative essay topic for both classes. The language arts teacher can grade it based on mechanics and the social studies teachers can grade it based on historical content. Another way the two departments can work together is plan out a historical era to be taught in history and a book from that time period to be read in language arts. By doing this, the students would be able to form more connections. Hopefully, with support from administration, I can start a discussion between the two departments after sharing my findings from this study.

One more way that I hope to get my findings out there is by proposing a blog post to the very well known teaching blog: *Edutopia*. This blog posts information written from educators from across the country that have something positive to say about how to better the experiences of students and teachers. I have been reading a lot of blog posts from Edutopia and I feel like I could write a meaningful post using the findings from my research strategy. In order to submit to *Edutopia*, I need to contact the guestblog@edutopia.org. I first have to briefly describe my proposed post with an outline, a few words about the intended target audience and an eighty-word biography about my role in education. The proposed post would amount to 750-850 words so the only information I would want to include is information on the themes of interesting strategies the students spoke about. I think other educators reading the comments made by actual students might be something that can have a positive affect on other educators. Because *Edutopia* is so well known, I might be over-reaching by trying to get published in this particular blog. Perhaps I can start with submitting to a smaller blog such as, *Teaching Blog Addict*, and take it from there.

One lesson that I have learned from this entire research process is that teacher research is meant to be shared; and educators have so much to learn from one another. Hearing suggestions about strategies to use in the classroom from other real-life educators is something that is very valuable. I hope to share my findings with others so that they hopefully learning something from my research project.