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AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECT OF CONSTRUCTIVIST AND  
COOPERATIVE LEARNING TEACHING TECHNIQUES ON STUDENT  
ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIAL STUDIES

by  
Dana Olivieri

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Science in Teaching Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
July 5, 2007

Approved by

Advisor

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## ABSTRACT

Dana Olivieri

### AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECT OF CONSTRUCTIVIST AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING TEACHING TECHNIQUES ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIAL STUDIES

2006/2007

Dr. David Hesse

Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this investigation was to see if teaching students through constructivist and cooperative learning teaching techniques increases student engagement in social studies. Thirteen sixth grade students participated in the investigation. They completed surveys before and after a curricular intervention that consisted of social studies instruction based on constructivist and cooperative learning techniques. During the intervention, the students' engagement was observed by the researcher. The students demonstrated that constructivist and cooperative learning teaching techniques led to an increase in engagement in social studies. Implications for future research and implications for teaching are discussed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is no way I could have gotten through the past five years without the support of my wonderful family and friends. My family has been with me throughout anything and everything, especially college and graduate school. I would like to thank my parents and brother Dave in particular. You have always been extremely supportive of me and encouraged me throughout my education. Without you I never could have made it to where I am today. My friends have helped me tremendously as well. Township girls and co-teach girls, you have helped me by listening, giving advice, or just taking my mind off the stress of it all. Thank you!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
List of Tables	v
CHAPTER	PAGE
1. Introduction	1
Purpose Statement	2
Statement of Research Problem and Question	4
Story of the Question	4
Organization of the Thesis	5
2. Literature Review	7
Introduction	7
The Current Status of Social Studies Education	7
The Goal of Social Studies	10
Alternative Instructional Approaches and Activities	11
Cooperative Learning	11
Constructivist Teaching	13
Incorporation into the Classroom	15
Conclusion	20
3. Methodology	22
Context of Study	22
General Methodology	24
Procedure of Study	24

	Data Sources	26
	Data Analysis	28
4.	Findings	30
	Review of Data	30
5.	Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations	39
	Significance of the Data	39
	Limitations of Study	43
	Implications for the Future	44
	Implications for the Profession	44
	References	46
	Appendices	48
	Appendix A Teacher Interview	49
	Appendix B Observation of Student Engagement Rating Scale	50
	Appendix C Student Survey: School Subjects	51
	Appendix D Student Survey: About Social Studies	52

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
Table 1 Student Rankings of Social Studies Pre-survey	33
Table 2 Student Rankings of Social Studies Post-survey	37
Table 3 Percent Change of Student Rankings of Social Studies	38

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

It is 12:30 Monday afternoon and a fourth grade class is just returning from lunch. As the students enter their room, they chat noisily about what happened during recess and over the weekend. Once they enter the room and are seated, the teacher moves to the front of the room, quiets the students down, and tells them it's time for social studies.

As they begin to take out their textbooks like they do during every social studies lesson, a few students roll their eyes. A few others let out a heavy sigh. Robert, a student who seems to say each and every thing that pops into his head exclaims, "I hate social studies!"

The class' social studies lesson consists of members of the class taking turns reading paragraphs from their textbook aloud. As this goes on, students around the room begin to yawn and put their heads down on their desks. Several students are reprimanded for not paying attention.

The energy and excitement that previously filled the classroom deflated as if a balloon had popped. The mere mention of social studies instantly changed students' attitudes. The longer the lesson went on, the more the students seemed lifeless, unmotivated, and bored.



## Purpose Statement

Research by Zhao and Hoge (2005) and Blanken (1999) has shown that the classroom depicted in the preceding vignette is more common than not. A study of three different school districts by Yali Zhao and John Hoge found that as a whole, students dislike social studies. The most common responses by students included, “it is boring and useless” and “it’s reading the textbook”. This shows a definite lack of engagement and interest in social studies (2005). Holding students’ interest is a crucial part of ensuring they are learning and working to their full potential. As Sumrall and Schillinger put it, “By making a lesson interesting, teachers can hold young peoples’ attention and make their learning easier” (2004, n.p.). With that being so, figuring out how to improve this situation is key to increasing student performance in social studies. The first step in working towards improvement is figuring out why the lack of interest exists.

Many studies and articles (Hoge, 1986; Sumrall and Schillinger, 2004) blame an over-reliance on social studies textbooks as the reason for the lack of student interest in social studies. A 1986 article by John Hoge drew attention to the fact that textbooks are too widely used as the primary instructional tool for social studies. Another article, written eighteen years later by Sumrall and Schillinger repeated this very same concern. Over reliance on textbooks in social studies is therefore not only well known, but also long-standing (Hoge, 1986; Sumrall & Schillinger, 2004).

It is the assumption of this researcher that the lack of student interest in social studies that arises out of continuously using the textbook for instruction can be improved with the use of different and varied instructional strategies. The instructional strategies that have been found to be the most successful and engaging for social studies instruction

are cooperative learning activities (Johnson et al., 1984; Stahl & VanSickle, 1992) and techniques based on constructivist theory (Perkins, 1999).

Cooperative learning, an instructional strategy in which students work in groups on a project or activity aimed at teaching them specific skills or information, has been proven to enhance student performance and engagement (Barnes & Farrell, 1990; Stahl & VanSickle, 1992). It has been found to increase students' social relationships, achievement, and attitudes toward subject matter (Barnes & Farrell, 1990; Stahl & VanSickle, 1992).

Constructivist teaching strategies can also be incorporated into social studies instruction to increase students' engagement. Students taught by constructivist teachers learn by thinking deeply, making connections, and asking questions (Blanken, 1999). Instead of being told information, they are active, social, and creative learners. They construct knowledge through discussions and investigations. While this is often done in conjunction with others, the knowledge that is gained is unique to each individual (Blanken, 1999). Research done on constructivism has shown that it can "lead to better retention, understanding, and active use of knowledge" (Perkins, 1999, p. 8)

Further research in this area has limitless potential. To this point, research (Zhao & Hoge, 2005; Blanken, 1999) has shown that students aren't interested in social studies. A textbook-based instructional approach is a potential cause of this problem. This research could confirm or refute this. Alternate teaching methods, such as cooperative learning experiences and constructivist teaching techniques, have been found to improve student interest and performance in social studies. Those teaching strategies are also studied in the current research.

## Statement of Research Problem and Question

Lack of student interest in social studies is a serious educational problem. When students are interested in something, their learning becomes easier and more successful. Research in this area could find instructional strategies that create a more engaging social studies learning environment. As a result, my research question is: Will incorporating constructivist and cooperative learning strategies and activities into social studies instruction make it more engaging?

## Story of the Question

Choosing a question around which to center my thesis was a daunting task. That single question was to become my topic and a large part of the next year of my life. In order to pick a question, I reflected on my own memories of school. My memories of school in general led me to thinking about social studies. Social studies is of particular importance to me because, although I am interested in and fond of it now, that was certainly not the case throughout most of my education.

My own memories of social studies over the course of my education have been surprisingly very similar regardless of grade level or teacher. In elementary school, the social studies instruction I received wholly consisted of reading chapters in a textbook and answering the questions that follow them. In high school, social studies was basically an extension of this, with reading textbooks and answering questions combined with lecture and more in-depth information. One history teacher, Mr. Olivo, stands out in my mind above the rest. The first thing that came to my mind when thinking about him was the interesting and humorous stories he told. Those stories, both relevant and

irrelevant to what we were studying, kept my classmates and I on the edge of our seats. That led me to wonder if personality is what makes an interesting social studies teacher.

I knew it had to be more than that, so I contacted a few of my former classmates. After reminiscing and a bit of going back and forth with “remember when” this and that happened in Mr. Olivo’s class, I realized that as I suspected, his personality isn’t what made him a great teacher. His stories excited and amused us, but his projects are what spiked our interest in the subject matter.

The project from Mr. Olivo’s class that stands out in my mind is one in which all the members of my class were assigned to be a member of the constitutional convention, research that person’s political ideologies, and then represent him in our class’ own constitutional convention. Looking back on this project, I realize that from an educational standpoint, it was exceptional. It made us research, take on the perspectives of others, work as a whole class, and be individually responsible for information.

My reflections of social studies really made me wonder. Why, in more than twelve years of schooling, did I encounter only one social studies teacher that captured my interest in the subject matter? Was there some teaching secret he had that no other teachers had discovered? Finding the “secret” to making social studies interesting and exciting for students was my motivation for centering my thesis on this topic.

### Organization of the Thesis

The chapters that follow discuss the results of an exploration of engagement in social studies through literature and a classroom study. Chapter two reviews literature relevant to engagement in social studies by examining the current status of student

interest in social studies, as well potential teaching strategies and techniques that may improve it. Chapter Three is made up of the methodology of the study. That consists of its setting and participants, as well as how data is collected and analyzed. The findings of the study are reviewed in Chapter Four and discussed in chapter five. The discussion in the Fifth Chapter includes a look at the significance of the data and study along with its limitations and implications for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

In 2005, Zhao and Hoge conducted a study of students' views and perceptions of social studies. Their findings would make most teachers cringe. Not only did the students "almost universally hold negative attitudes toward social studies," the majority of them also did not understand its importance. In addition, their knowledge of basic topics was described as "limited" (p. 220). The most common reasons students gave for disliking social studies were that it is boring and "it's reading the textbook" (p. 218). These claims are not at all surprising given that the teachers of these students identified the textbook as their "primary resource" when teaching social studies (p. 218).

Zhao and Hoge's study only confirms the widely held belief that students must be interested in what they are learning in order to be successful. As Sumrall and Schillinger (2004) point out, "by making a lesson interesting, teachers can hold young people's attention and make their learning easier". Zahorik (1996) even takes it a step further in the claim that gaining students' cooperation, which comes from meeting their interests, is the only way learning occurs. He goes on to say that this is the "essence of teaching" (p. 551).

#### The Current Status of Social Studies Education

Many researchers have pointed out that the traditional and most common method

of social studies instruction, relying on the textbook, is not appealing to or successful with students. A 1986 article by John Hoge claimed that the “textbook alone” approach to social studies instruction is too prevalent. In 2004, almost 20 years later, this same concern was echoed by Sumrall and Schillinger.

Hoge, (1986) Sumrall and Schillinger (2004) have good reason to be concerned with the prevalence of the textbook approach to social studies instruction. Not only do students dislike reading their social studies textbooks, they struggle when doing so. “Two problems young children have in reading elementary social studies textbooks stem from lack of experiential background and complex social studies content” (Hoge, 1986). The lack of experiential background refers to the trouble students have relating social studies topics to their own lives. They may not see any point in studying far away places and times of long ago. The complexity of social studies textbooks causes students trouble because often times they get hung up on technical concepts and vocabulary as well as hard to pronounce names and places (Hoge, 1986). In addition, many students are unfamiliar with expository reading, causing additional difficulty. As if all of this was not enough, textbooks have been found to be written for the above-average reader (Villano, 2005).

In summary, textbooks that are used as the primary method for teaching social studies commonly cause a great deal of difficulty when students try to read them (Hoge, 1986). Not only do students have trouble understanding the technical concepts inherent in social studies content, students have trouble relating such concepts to their own lives (Hoge, 1986). All of this is worsened by a lack of familiarity with expository text and a textbook that in most cases, was written on a higher reading level than they are capable of

(Villano, 2005). It is no wonder students as a whole dislike reading textbooks and social studies in general. With all of these challenges facing students when they are taught using the textbook approach to social studies, it seems as if they are destined for low achievement (Blanken, 1999; Zhao & Hoge, 2005).

Blanken's research study titled, *Increasing Student Engagement in Social Studies* (1999) discusses a large number of studies and publications that point out achievement problems that arise out of the textbook approach of teaching social studies. An inherent problem that arises out of purely relying on textbooks is that they tend to be static and easily become outdated. In addition, the traditional method of teaching social studies from the textbook is very disconnected and inauthentic. That is the result of events and actions being presented as if they were isolated in nature instead of a part of interconnected events and actions. Furthermore, topics are typically not taught in depth. Important and trivial topics are given the same shallow explanations, leaving students without a sense of major and minor ideas and events (Blanken, 1999).

Presenting material in the shallow traditional way comes at a price. Purely "telling" information, through lecture and textbook reading results in students only retaining it long enough to pass a test. They come up short when it is necessary to apply knowledge to new scenarios or other subjects (Blanken, 1999). It is the opinion of this researcher that only remembering information long enough to pass tests and not being able to apply it to other areas is proof that no meaningful learning is taking place.



## The Goal of Social Studies

The shortcomings of the textbook approach to teaching social studies seem especially important when looking at the big picture. Teachers need to stay grounded and frequently ask themselves what they want their students to get out of their teaching. In this case, it is necessary to look at what we want students to get out of social studies. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) outlines two main goals of social studies in its curriculum standards. The first of these goals is teaching students social understanding, which refers to the content taught through social studies. The second goal of social studies identified by the NCSS is the promotion of civic efficacy. That refers to the way students use the knowledge of the content they learn in social studies. The NCSS views social studies not as a subject with knowledge to be taught. It wants the subject matter to be taught in such a way that students can use it in their lives and become active citizens who participate in the affairs of their community, country, and world (Wasta & Lott, 2006).

With all that has been discovered about the textbook approach to social studies, it seems very clear that instruction based primarily on reading textbooks is not working to advance the goals of the NCSS. It has been found that with that approach, students are only likely to remember what they learn long enough to pass a test. It has also been found that students have trouble applying what they learn to new situations when they are taught using that approach (Blanken, 1999). Obviously, if students do not remember any of what they learn after being tested on it, and cannot apply any of that knowledge to other situations, creating knowledgeable and active citizens will not occur from that type of instruction.

## Alternative Instructional Approaches and Activities

Since research suggests (Hoge, 1986; Sumrall & Schillinger, 2004) that the traditional textbook approach to social studies instruction is not working to advance the goals of the NCSS, the challenge becomes finding instructional approaches to social studies that will serve that purpose. It is important to keep in mind that we are looking to teach students content as well as train them to become active citizens. The remainder of this chapter will focus on educational strategies that can work to advance the goals of the NCSS. Those strategies are cooperative learning and teaching using the constructivist philosophy.

### Cooperative Learning

While many people may view cooperative learning as having students work in groups, it is much more than that. As Barnes and Farrell (1990, n.p.) put it, “cooperative learning is a set of instructional strategies that include cooperative student-to-student-interaction based on subject matter as an integral part of the learning process”. It involves carefully planning activities so that students working in groups are dependent on one another while being held accountable for their own actions at the same time (Barnes and Farrell, 1990, n.p.).

Cooperative learning is a highly valued educational strategy because of the many benefits that are said to come from it. In their 1992 article titled *Cooperative Learning as Effective Social Study within the Social Studies Classroom*, Stahl and VanSickle feature an expansive list of benefits of cooperative learning. They argue that with cooperative

learning, students improve test scores, increase intrinsic motivation to learn, decrease off-task behaviors, and view learning in a positive light. In addition to this, Stahl and VanSickle discuss many ways cooperative learning helps students socially. They claim it improves students' relationships, increases willingness to share ideas, and increases the number of friendships based on human qualities.

While Stahl and VanSickle's (1992) list of advantages of cooperative learning is impressive, studies that scientifically show its benefits are even more telling. In 1984, Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, and Ray analyzed the results of 122 studies that looked at cooperative, competitive, and individualistic instructional strategies. Their findings were quite significant. In no case did cooperative learning result in lower achievement than teaching with one of the other two methods. In fact, the majority of the time, cooperative learning was found to result in greater achievement than the other two instructional strategies. That was found to be true regardless of grade level or subject area. Johnson et al. (1984) also found that compared to competitive and individualistic instruction, cooperative learning resulted in students having greater critical thinking, attitudes toward subject areas, and self esteem. In addition, they found that with cooperative learning, students heightened their interpersonal skills and fondness of classmates, especially across gender, ethnic, ability, and social lines (Barnes & Farrell, 1990).

Cooperative learning has been proven (Stahl & VanSickle, 1992; Barnes & Farrell, 1990) to enhance student motivation and achievement. With that being so, integrating cooperative learning strategies into classrooms should work to advance at least one of the goals of the NCSS. Research (Barnes & Farrell, 1990) has proven that cooperative learning should help to advance the goal of teaching students content

knowledge in the area of social studies. The other goal, training students to eventually become active citizens, must be met in social studies teaching as well. If teachers plan and implement lessons according to the constructivist theory of learning, creating active citizens through social studies instruction is entirely possible.

### Constructivist Teaching

The idea behind constructivism is that “the mind is active in the making of knowledge” (Graffam, 2003, p. 13). As cited in Blanken (1999), Brooks and Brooks assert that constructivist teachers are not “givers of information” but “mediators of students and environments” (p. 32). They facilitate learning through planning and preparation, but don’t instruct in the traditional way. Instead they “plan tasks for their students that ask them to think deeply, to make connections, to analyze, question, predict, and synthesize” (Blanken, 1999, p. 32).

In *The Courage to be Constructivist* (1999), Brooks and Brooks outline “five central tenets” of how constructivist teachers structure their classrooms (p. 21). The first of these is that teachers “seek and value students’ points of views” (p. 21). Doing that means teachers taking the needs and interests of the students into consideration when they plan lessons and differentiate instruction. The second things constructivist teachers do is challenge the assumptions their students hold about the world. Brooks and Brooks assert that this is done by teachers asking students what they think they know, why they think they know it, and then challenging that information. They are adamant that “when educators permit students to construct knowledge that challenges their current suppositions, learning occurs” (p. 21). The third tenet of constructivism listed by Brooks

and Brooks is teachers recognizing that students “must attach relevance to the curriculum” and plan accordingly so that students are able to find importance in what they are learning (p. 21). The fourth thing constructivist teachers do is plan lessons around big ideas instead of small pieces of information. They argue that, “exposing students to wholes first helps them determine the relevant parts as they refine their understandings of the wholes” (p. 21). The final tenet of constructivism is that constructivist teachers assess their students’ learning during everyday classroom activities, not through separate events. Brooks and Brooks feel that students’ understanding and knowledge is demonstrated daily in many ways. If paper and pencil assessments alone are relied on for assessment, students’ knowledge is not accurately being measured (1999).

Blanken (1999) asserts that constructivist teaching creates active, social, and creative learners. Active learners “discuss, debate, hypothesize, investigate, and take viewpoints” instead of learning in more traditional ways like listening and reading. Social learners construct knowledge often times in part with others. They recognize that knowledge and understanding are highly social as what is considered truth often times depends on a person’s viewpoint. Finally, creative learners commonly create or recreate knowledge for themselves. This enables them to truly understand things like scientific theories and historical perspectives (Blanken, 1999).

Constructivism is not merely a championed theory without research proving its effectiveness. Perkins (1999), Duffy and Johanssen (1992), Reigeluth (1999), Wilson (1996), and Wiske (1998), have all studied constructivism and its effect on learning. According to Perkins, research supports the belief that “active engagement in learning

may lead to better retention, understanding, and active use of knowledge” (Perkins, 1999, p.8). With that being said, it now seems as if using the constructivist philosophy to guide teaching and learning could lead educators to achievement of the goals of the NCSS. Since research suggests (Perkins, 1999) that it can lead to better retention, understanding, and active use of knowledge, constructivism seems like an excellent approach for the teaching of content knowledge and preparing students to be active citizens.

### Incorporation into the Classroom

Just like with any instructional strategy, incorporating cooperative learning, children’s literature, and constructivist practices into the social studies classroom can be done in many different ways using a variety of activities. There are some very common methods and activities that incorporate those three educational strategies effectively, and as a result, are quite popular.

Before having students participate in cooperative learning activities, it is important that the teacher creates lessons that are truly cooperative. According to Johnson and Johnson, (1991) there are five basic elements of truly cooperative lessons (Baloche, 1994). They are positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interactions, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing (Baloche, 1994). Positive interdependence refers to students’ success and tasks being linked to one another. Face-to-face promotive interaction refers to the responsibility teachers have of establishing groups of students that will promote one another’s success. Individual accountability is important because it ensures and requires that all students contribute to and learn from group activities. In order to help groups attain interpersonal

and small group skills, teachers must teach and remind students what those skills are as well as give groups specific goals to accomplish. The fifth and final aspect of cooperative learning lessons, group processing, refers to the importance of having students assess how well their groups are doing academically and socially (Baloche, 1994).

Once cooperative groups are established, there are a variety of activities that can be used in that setting. Two of the most popular cooperative learning activities are *Jigsaw* and *Co-op Co-op* (Barnes & Farrell, 1990). In *Jigsaw*, students first meet in study groups. The groups work together and help one another become experts on a specific topic. Then, each member of each study group becomes a member of a learning team. When the learning teams meet, their members teach one another the information they have become experts on. Once this activity is complete, each student is held individually accountable for all of the information. The second strategy, *Co-op Co-op*, refers to students “cooperating in small groups in order to cooperate with the whole class”. In this activity, groups of students work together to learn about a topic, which they later present to the rest of the class (Barnes & Farrell, 1990).

Integrating constructivist activities into classrooms can be done in a number of different ways. In fact, it is more than likely that no two constructivist classrooms look alike (Perkins, 1999). The most important thing to remember when trying to incorporate constructivism is making students active in their learning (Sumrall & Schillinger, 2004). As Brooks and Brooks (1999) put it, “learners control their learning. This simple truth lies at the heart of the constructivist approach to education” (p. 21). Constructivist teachers realize that students find meaning in what they are taught on an individual basis.

Even when the same things are taught to an entire class at the same time, what is learned is unique to each student. That is the result of students having their own cognitive processes, prior knowledge, and past experiences, all of which contribute to how they construct meaning from what they are taught (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Taking into consideration how students learn is what constructivism is all about. Constructivist teachers realize that students are motivated to learn when they are interested in what they are learning. This motivation can come from constructivist teaching practices (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). In constructivist classrooms, information is not just “told.” Instead of merely receiving knowledge, students explore and confront information and topics (Sumrall & Schillinger, 2004).

There are a large number of activities that can be used in classrooms that are grounded in constructivism. Gallavan and Kottler (2002) suggest eight activities, all of which integrate children’s literacy and can be used to teach under the constructivist model. Those eight strategies are as follows: using multiple intelligences, using Bloom’s Taxonomy of thinking skills, constructing categories, graffiti walls, the fish bowl, taking a stand, the DRAFT writing strategy, and the fold-over paper prompt.

The first of Gallavan and Kottler’s (2002) activities, using multiple intelligences, requires students to create a response to an assigned reading in groups. The groups are each assigned a different kind of intelligence and develop their response according to what they are assigned. For example, the group assigned to the musical/rhythmic intelligence may write a song about the particular topic or event they read about.

The activity in which students use Bloom’s Taxonomy of thinking skills requires they work in groups to create questions about a piece of literature they read. The



challenging part of this activity is when teachers ask the groups to come up with questions from each category of Bloom's Taxonomy of thinking skills. Once the groups complete their list of questions, they switch with another group and answer and discuss the questions the members of that group made (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002).

Constructing categories can be done in one of two ways. One way it can be done is by asking groups of students to "generate a list of examples illustrating a specific topic" (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002). The second way to use this activity is by asking students to come with categories that can be used to sort examples relating to the topic. For example, if transportation were the topic at hand, the first method would entail groups coming up with examples of transportation. The second method would involve creating categories for which to sort those examples into (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002).

Another of Gallavan and Kottler's (2002) activities, called graffiti walls, involves groups of students discussing and writing about a specific topic or question on a poster board for a given amount of time. Once the allotted time is up, groups rotate, discuss, and write about another topic. After all the groups have gotten to all the questions, a classroom discussion of what was written about each topic or question ensues (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002).

The fishbowl activity involves students identifying and then defending viewpoints evident in an assigned passage. Groups of students first work together on a particular viewpoint, and then one representative from each group is chosen to meet with the representatives from other groups. The representatives are placed in the inside of a circle made by the rest of the class, presented with a controversial question, and asked to defend their viewpoint (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002).

In taking a stand, after a class discussion of a controversial topic and its possible solutions, students independently decide their personal view. That view is then selected by each student as a specific place on a continuum of possible solutions (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002). Taking a stand is similar to a constructivist activity by Perkins (1999). He is an advocate of problem-based learning, which involves presenting students with a problem or project to explore. In working on the problem or project, the students learn a set of concepts.

The DRAFT writing strategy is another of Gallavan and Kottler's (2002) activities. DRAFT is an acronym for the following steps that students are required to follow: Design, Role, Audience, Format, and Topic. These steps require students to design a piece of writing, identify the role of the writer, determine the writer's audience, decide upon a format, and create a topic of the piece of writing. For example, if a student was asked to use this strategy while learning about the civil war, he may choose to write a series of letters to a particular state's newspaper. His role could be that state's governor. The topic of the letters could be informing the citizens of the effects of the civil war on their state (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002).

The last activity Gallavan and Kottler (2002) mentioned is the fold-over paper prompt. It entails students having a "silent" conversation in writing. After the teacher provides a prompt, one student responds and passes the paper to another student who also responds. Before passing the paper to the third student, the second student folds over the paper so the next student can only see the most recent response before writing. This continues for a given amount of time. At the end of the allotted time, the students unfold the paper, look at all the responses, and use it to stimulate class discussion.

A variety of activities grounded in the constructivist perspective can be found online at the Institute for Learning Centered Education (Gabler et al., 2002). One such activity is called a word splash, and involves students using brainstorming and prior knowledge to find meaning in words related to a particular topic. Another activity grounded in constructivism is a think-pair-share. This involves students being posed a question, thinking about it for a specific period of time, and then talking with a partner about it. After a certain amount of time has elapsed, the pairs share their thoughts on the question with the class. Focused free-writing is another activity suggested by Gabler et al. (2002). A focused free-write is basically a quick write. Students are given a topic and are given the opportunity to write about it for a period of time. A think aloud follows such an activity, which involves the students sharing what they have written (Gabler et al., 2002).

## Conclusion

As research suggests (Blanken, 1999), the state of social studies instruction is less than adequate in many instructional settings. The majority of teachers use the traditional method of exclusively relying on social studies textbooks to teach (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). There are many disadvantages to this approach, including the fact that students have a hard time relating to and comprehending the information included within textbooks. In addition, research (Hoge, 1986) has shown that the textbook approach to social studies instruction doesn't result in students retaining information or being able to apply it to new situations (Hoge, 1986). This is in direct conflict with the goals of the National Council for the Social Studies, which views social studies as a method for educating students on

content as well as preparing them to become active citizens (Wasta & Lott, 2006). In order to achieve these goals, different methods of social studies instruction must be integrated into classrooms. Research has shown that integrating cooperative learning, children's literature, and constructivist teaching into classrooms results in greater student retention and application of knowledge (Baloche, 1994; Barnes & Farrell, 1990; Johnson et al., 1984; Perkins, 1999).

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Context of Study

This study was conducted in Delta Township (name has been fictionalized), Gloucester County, New Jersey. According to the United States Census, in the year 2000 the population of this town was nearly 27,000. The population is primarily white, as more than eighty-three percent of its members identified themselves as so. In addition, twelve percent of Delta population identified itself as African American, three percent identified itself as Hispanic, and one and one half percent of the population identified itself as Asian.

Delta Township is a middle income community. In the year 2000, the median household income was just above \$50,000. The largest percent of its households (twenty-five percent) make between \$50,000 and \$75,000 per year. In 1999, 303 families, which comprised 4.3% of the township's population, were recorded as living below the poverty line.

Of Delta's population of almost 27,000, nearly 7,000 of its residents are enrolled in school. The students who attend public school within the township go to one of the many schools in the town's school district. Delta Township School District consists of six elementary schools, a middle school, a high school, and a special needs school.

This study took place at Lincoln School (name has been fictionalized); an elementary school made up of grades two through six. There are four or five classes of

each grade level within the school, where approximately four hundred students are educated. The specific classroom in which the study took place is a sixth grade inclusion classroom. This class is made up of eighteen students and contains both regular and special education students. Two thirds of these students (twelve) are Caucasian, and one third of them (six) are African American. The parents of thirteen of the eighteen students consented to their children participating in the study. Of the participating students, ten are Caucasian and three are African American. The thirteen participating students are made up of nine girls and four boys. These students range from eleven to twelve years old. Six out of the thirteen participating students are disabled and have Individualized Education Plans.

Two classroom teachers are participants in this study as well. Both teachers are in the classroom for the duration of the school day, as one teacher is general education and the other is special education. Both teachers are Caucasian women. The regular education is in her late twenties and has had two years teaching experience prior to the current school year. The special education teacher is in her late forties and has had seventeen years teaching experience.

Throughout this study, confidentiality will be strictly maintained. Only the researcher will know the identity of the teachers and students involved. Data collection, including both surveys and interviews, will be anonymous. Any discussion of specific students and/or teachers will consist of fictionalized names.

## General Methodology

This study will examine how engaged a sixth grade class is in social studies when presented with different instructional strategies. The goal of the research is to find teaching methods and techniques that increase student engagement in social studies. In order to do so, it is important to clearly define what engagement is. It is the opinion of this researcher that during lessons, students demonstrate their level of engagement in the subject matter through a variety of behaviors. Students engaged in a lesson look at and make eye contact with the teacher or person speaking. They also volunteer frequently, answering and asking questions, as well as contributing to class discussion. During independent and group assignments and projects, engaged students work diligently. Students who are not engaged in lessons or activities are easily distracted. They often demonstrate their lack of interest in the subject by exhibiting off-task behaviors, such as talking, drawing, and not paying attention. There are several pieces of data that can be collected in order to measure student engagement in social studies. Such data items will be discussed in the next section.

## Procedure of Study

In order to work to improve student engagement in social studies, the researcher must first learn about the teaching methods most commonly used by the teachers in that classroom. That can be done relatively easily. Interviewing the teachers about their practices when teaching social studies will accomplish this.

The researcher will then survey the students on their opinions, preferences, and interests in relation to social studies and other subjects. Since opinions, preferences, and

interests are major factors that contribute to engagement, the researcher will use the results of the surveys to gauge how engaged the students are in social studies.

The information learned in the teacher interviews and student surveys will be taken into consideration when the researcher designs and implements an intervention. The intervention will consist of social studies instruction comprised of teaching methods that are not normally used in the classroom.

Once the intervention is implemented and completed, the students will again be surveyed on their opinions, preferences, and interests in relation to social studies and other subjects. This will allow the researcher to once again measure the students' engagement.

The final source of data used in this study will be the teacher's observations of student engagement during social studies lessons. These will be done during each social studies lesson throughout the course of the study. The observations will be recorded on a student engagement rating scale. The rating scale includes five different areas to be measured. The items will be identified as occurring during the lesson most of the time, about half of the time, or seldom. The things measured on this rating scale are student apparent interest, student contribution to class, student diligence during individual and group work, and student off-task behavior.

At the beginning of the research collection, the parents of the students in the class will be asked to give their children permission to participate in the research study. While the data is being collected, the only students asked to complete the survey will be those who had been given permission to do so by their parents. All data collected will be kept completely confidential. The teachers' names will be pseudonyms in the discussion of



the results of the teacher interview. When the students complete surveys, they will be instructed not to put their names on them. At no time during the discussion and analysis of the data will any students' real names be used.

#### Data Sources

The first data collected will be interviews of each of the two teachers in the classroom. The interview questions ask the teachers to identify specific resources they use when teaching social studies and how often they use them. The teachers are also asked to describe the types of lessons used in their social studies instruction. They are asked to elaborate upon that in a question that inquires into how often social studies is made up of independent, partner, and group work. The interview also includes questions that deal with student engagement. The teachers are asked to compare their students' engagement in social studies with their engagement in other subjects. Also, they are asked how important their students perceive social studies to be. The specific interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

The researcher will have the students complete two surveys both before and after the intervention has taken place. The first of the two, which was adapted from Blanken, 1999, will ask students to rank their school subjects from what they like most to what they like least, and is set forth in Appendix C. This survey, titled *School Subjects*, will also ask them to comment on what makes subjects most and least favorable. This survey will give the researcher a sense of where individual students and the class as a whole rank social studies compared to other subjects. In addition to ranking school subjects, this survey will ask the students to comment on what makes subjects favorable and

unfavorable. This will provide the researcher with insight into why students find certain subjects appealing and some unappealing. That information can be taken into consideration by the researcher when planning lessons and activities included in the intervention.

The second survey, titled *About Social Studies*, was also adapted from Blanken, 1999. It asks the students to decide how much they agree with several statements about social studies, and is set forth in Appendix D. The statements pertain to the types of activities done in social studies as well as its usefulness and enjoyableness. This will allow the researcher to hone in on students' feelings about specific things related to social studies. Just with the information from the first survey, the researcher will use the information gained from this when planning lessons and activities included in the intervention.

The final data source that will be collected in this study is the researcher's observations of student engagement during lessons taught throughout the intervention. The researcher's observations will be recorded on a student engagement rating scale (included in Appendix B). The rating scale is made up of five different areas in which the researcher has concluded are related to student engagement. The items featured on the rating scale are: how attentive and interested students seem, how much students contribute to class discussion, how diligently students work during group work, how diligently students work during independent work, and how often students perform off-task behaviors. At the conclusion of each lesson that is part of the intervention, the researcher will record the frequency in which each of the items occurred depending on if it was most of the time, about half of the time, or seldom.

## Data Analysis

Analysis of the research will occur several times over the course of the study. The interviews of the teachers will provide the researcher with information about the most common methods and resources used to teach social studies in the classroom. It will also shed light on how engaged the students are in social studies. The researcher will analyze the information gained from the teacher interview so that the intervention includes teaching methods and strategies that are different from those normally used.

The information learned from the student surveys will also be used when the researcher plans the intervention. In addition to that, the researcher will analyze the students' responses to see what percentage of the class feels a particular way. For example, on the first survey, the research will use the surveys to see what percentage of the class rates social studies as their favorite subject, second favorite subject, and so on. The same will be done for the second survey. For each statement, the researcher will identify what percentage of the class finds it very true, pretty true, a little true, and untrue.

After the intervention has taken place, the same two surveys will be given to the students to measure their feelings towards social studies. The information will be analyzed according to the class percentages of ratings of social studies as it was with the first surveys. Comparing the students' feelings about social studies before and after the intervention will allow the researcher to determine whether or not the teaching strategies and activities used in the intervention led to greater student engagement in social studies.

When determining how engaged the students are over the course of the study, the researcher will also take her observations into consideration. The observations recorded on the engagement rating scale will shed light on how engaged the students were

throughout the intervention. Since a rating scale will be completed based on individual lessons, it will allow the researcher to compare engagement over the course of the intervention. Since individual lessons will contain a variety of different teaching strategies, the observations will provide insight as to which teaching strategies increase student engagement.

## Chapter Four

### Findings

#### Review of Data

The data collection period of this study began on March 30, 2007. On that day each of the two teachers (one regular education and one special education) within the classroom were interviewed. Each teacher was interviewed separately but asked the same series of questions. The interviews began with each teacher being asked which resource or resources they most commonly use to teach social studies. Both teachers identified the textbook, maps, and the internet as their main resources. Each teacher also named one additional resource. One talked about literature and the other said overheads. The teachers were also asked the types of lessons social studies usually consists of in their classroom. The regular education teacher informed me that her lessons usually consist of reading and some sort of student-centered or hands-on activity like projects or skits. The special education teacher also said she tries to have student-centered lessons. Her instruction usually consists of the students completing cumulative projects that take the place of traditional tests.

When asked how often independent, partner, and cooperative group activities are used in social studies instruction, the regular education teacher said each is used pretty much equally. The special education teacher said she uses cooperative group activities most frequently, about half the time. She also uses independent and partner activities, each about one fourth of the time in her instruction.

The final two questions I asked the teachers were in regards to their perceptions of how their students view social studies. Both teachers said they feel their students are very interested in social studies. Each of them said the large number of in-depth questions the students ask during social studies are evidence of their interest. Both teachers also said their students perceive social studies as an important subject. The regular education teacher said her students do not always grasp historical events but are able to connect them to today's world. Similarly, the special education teacher said her students can make connections between history and present-day events as well as make connections between social studies and other subjects.

Once the teachers were interviewed on their instruction and perception of student interest in social studies, the second piece of data collected were surveys of the students in the classroom. Two separate surveys were completed before the actual teaching intervention took place. These pre-surveys were meant to gather baseline data regarding student perceptions of social studies and to measure student engagement and interest in social studies.

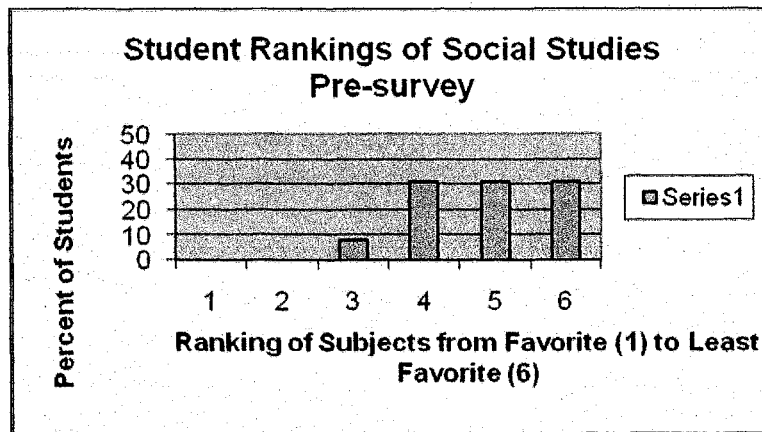
The first of the two pre-surveys was completed by the students on April 2, 2007. Thirteen students completed this survey after lunch at around 1:45 P.M. The survey consisted of the following seven statements: All I do in social studies class is read the textbook; in social studies class, students have to think a lot; learning social studies is useful; learning social studies is enjoyable; in social studies class, students do fun and interesting projects; I am usually bored in social studies class; and in social studies class, I learn about things I am interested in. The students had the opportunity to respond to each of these statements by checking off one of four boxes that best shows their opinion.

The students were able to represent if they thought the statement was very true, pretty true, a little true, or not true. This survey can be found in Appendix C. The results of the survey are discussed below.

The first statement on this survey is “All I do in social studies class is read the textbook”. In reference to this statement, no student identified it as very true, three students identified it as pretty true, five students identified it as a little true, and five students identified it as not true. In regards to the next statement, “In social studies class, students have to think a lot”, four students said it is very true, five students said it is pretty true, four students said it is a little true, and zero students said it is not true. The third statement is “Learning social studies is useful”. Seven students labeled this very true, six labeled it pretty true, and zero students labeled it a little true or not true. The next statement, “Learning social studies is enjoyable”, resulted in zero students calling it very true, six students calling it pretty true, four students calling it a little true, and three students calling it untrue. The sixth statement on the survey is “In social studies class, students do fun and interesting projects”. Two students identified this as very true, six students identified it as pretty true, three students identified it as a little true, and two students identified it as not true. In regards to the statement, “I am usually bored in social studies class”, five students said it is very true, two students said it is pretty true, five students said it is a little true, and one student said it is not true. The seventh and final statement reads, “In social studies class, I learn about things I am interested in”. No student identified this statement as very true, three students identified it as pretty true, four students labeled it a little true, and six students labeled it not true.

The second of the pre-surveys was completed on April 3, 2007. Like the first survey, this was also completed by thirteen students after lunch at around 1:45 P.M. This survey required students to rank school subjects in order from their favorite to least favorite. The results of this survey are reported in the chart below. Before the intervention, none of the students in the class reported social studies as their favorite or second favorite subject. Eight percent of the students surveyed identified social studies as their third favorite subject. An equal number of students, thirty-one percent, reported social studies as their fourth, fifth, and least favorite subject. The results of this survey can be found on Table 1 below.

Table 1: Student Rankings of Social Studies Pre-survey



Once the teacher interviews and initial surveys were completed, the teaching intervention began. This consisted of social studies instruction being centered on constructivist and cooperative learning teaching techniques for an entire chapter of social studies. During the intervention, which lasted eleven school days, data was taken on a daily basis. The researcher's observations of student engagement during different social studies activities and lessons were recorded on a student engagement rating scale. These observations were recorded at the conclusion of each social studies lesson. The rating



scale includes five points that the researcher identified as crucial to student engagement. The data recorded on the rating scale are how interested students appear, how much they contribute to class discussion, how diligently they work alone and in groups, and how often students perform off-task behaviors. An example of the observation rating scale can be found in Appendix B.

Eleven lessons were taught during the intervention period. This period spanned three weeks beginning April 10, 2007 and ending April 26, 2007. At the conclusion of each lesson, the observations of student engagement were recorded on the rating scale according to the nature of the lesson. For example, if lessons did not consist of independent work, nothing was recorded in that place on the rating scale. After all the observations were recorded, the frequency of the results in each category were computed. The results of the rating scale are as follows. The first category on the rating scale addresses if students appear attentive, interested, and motivated during lessons. During fifty-five percent of all eleven lessons, students appeared attentive, interested, and motivated most of the time. In forty-five percent of those lessons, students appeared attentive, interested, and motivated about half of the time. During class discussions, the students contributed most of the time in sixty-three percent of all eleven lessons. Contribution was about half the time during thirty-eight percent of all eleven lessons. The third part of the rating scale deals with how diligently students worked independently. In each lesson, all the students in the class worked diligently most of the time. Diligence during group work was also measured. In sixty-seven percent of the eleven lessons, diligence was exhibited most of the time. In thirty-three percent of those lessons, diligence was exhibited about half the time. The final part of the rating scale

measures how often students exhibited off-task behaviors. In only nine percent of lessons were the students off-task most of the time. In eighteen percent of the lessons students were off-task about half the time. Seventy-two percent of the eleven lessons occurred with students being off-task seldomly.

At the conclusion of the intervention, data was taken on the students' perception of social studies once again. The students in the intervention completed the two surveys for a second time. The first of these post-surveys required students to respond to the same seven statements about social studies that were included in the pre-survey. This survey was completed by the same thirteen students on May 1, 2007 at 2:00 P.M.

In response to the first statement, "All I do in social studies class is read the textbook", no student identified it as very true, three students identified it as pretty true, six students identified it as a little true, and four students identified it as not true. In regards to the next statement, "In social studies class, students have to think a lot", two students said it is very true, six students said it is pretty true, five students said it is a little true, and zero students said it is not true. The third statement is "Learning social studies is useful". Five students labeled this very true, seven labeled it pretty true, and one student labeled it a little true, and zero students labeled it not true. The next statement, "Learning social studies is enjoyable", resulted in zero students calling it very true, four students calling it pretty true, five students calling it a little true, and four students calling it untrue. The sixth statement on the survey is "In social studies class, students do fun and interesting projects". Two students identified this as very true, five students identified it as pretty true, three students identified it as a little true, and three students identified it as not true. In regards to the statement, "I am usually bored in social studies

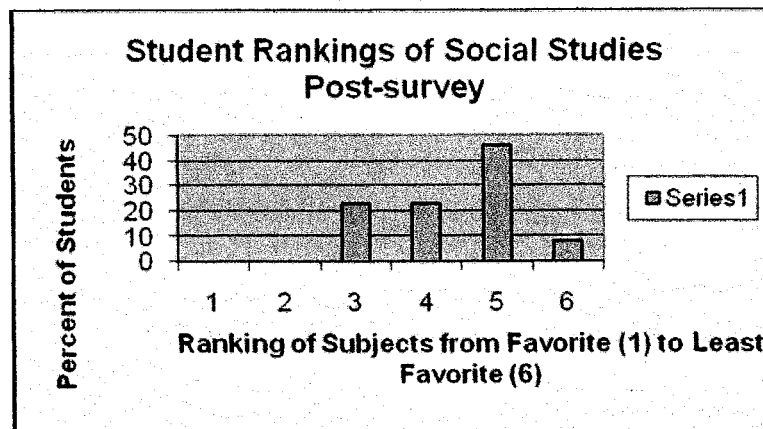
class”, four students said it is very true, two students said it is pretty true, six students said it is a little true, and one student said it is not true. The seventh and final statement says, “In social studies class, I learn about things I am interested in”. One student identified this statement as very true, two students identified it as pretty true, five students labeled it a little true, and five students labeled it not true.

The way the students’ responded to the seven statements about social studies changed somewhat after the teaching intervention. In regards to the first statement, “All I do in social studies class is read the textbook,” after the intervention the number of students who marked it a little true increased by one and the number who marked not true decreased by one. In the second statement, “In social studies class, students have to think a lot,” the number of students who responded very true decreased by two, the number who responded pretty true increased by one, and the number who responded a little true increased by one. In response to “Learning social studies is useful,” on the postsurvey two less students chose very true, one more student chose pretty true, and one more student chose a little true. In the fourth statement, “Learning social studies is enjoyable,” two less students marked pretty true, one more students marked a little true, and one more student marked it not true. In regards to “In social studies class, students do fun and interesting projects,” in the post-survey, one less student labeled it pretty true and one more student labeled it not true. In the sixth statement, “I am usually bored in social studies class,” one less student said very true and one more student said a little true. In the final statement, “In social studies class, I learn about things I am interested in,” one more student labeled it very true after the intervention. In addition, one less student

identified it as pretty true, one more student identified it as a little true, and one less student identified it as not true.

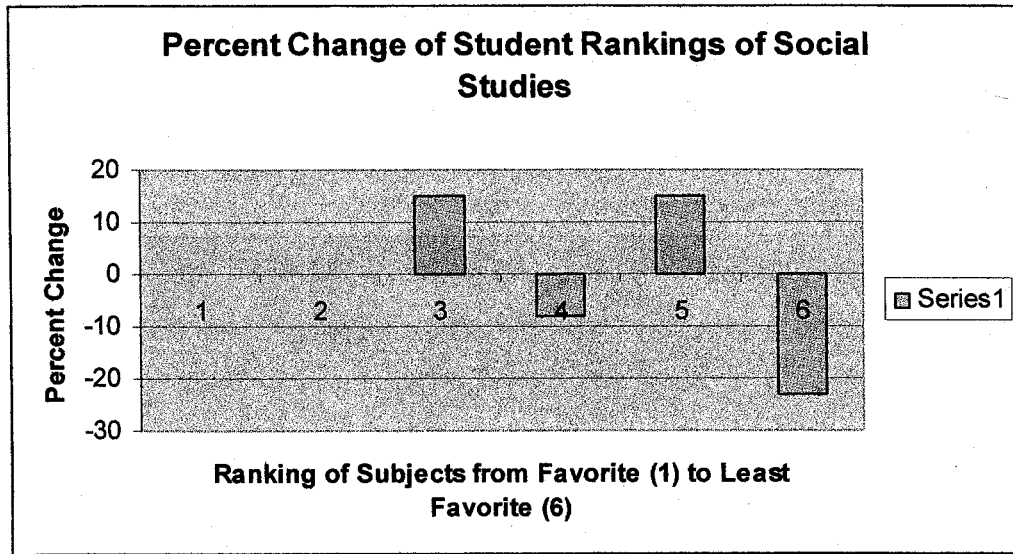
In the second post-survey, the students ranked their school subjects from favorite to least favorite. This survey was completed on May 2, 2007 at 1:45 P.M. In the school subject rankings, no student identified social studies as his or her favorite or second favorite subject. Twenty-three percent of students labeled social studies as their third and fourth favorite subjects. Social studies was identified as the fifth favorite subject by forty-six percent of students. In addition, social studies was the least favorite subject for eight percent of the students surveyed. Table 2 below depicts these results.

Table 2: Student Rankings of Social Studies Post-survey



The way the students ranked social studies as compared to other subjects changed from the beginning of the study to the end. Social studies was ranked as the third favorite subject fifteen percent more often. It was ranked as the fourth favorite subject eight percent less. It was ranked as the fifth favorite subject fifteen percent more often and as the least favorite subject twenty-three percent less. Table 3 below depicts the percent change of how students ranked social studies.

Table 3: Percent Change of Student Rankings of Social Studies



## Chapter Five

### Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### Significance of the Data

Throughout this study, the researcher has been trying to find out if incorporating constructivist and cooperative learning strategies and activities into social studies instruction will make it more engaging. In a variety of ways, the research done during the course of the study shows that constructivist and cooperative learning strategies and activities do increase student engagement in social studies.

The first data source that shows the affect of constructivist and cooperative learning teaching strategies on student engagement in social studies is the change in the way students ranked social studies as compared to other subjects. This was done when the students completed a survey in which they ranked their favorite school subjects. The survey was completed before and after the curricular intervention. This is perhaps the most telling of all the data sources because the changes in responses on the survey were quite significant. After the teaching intervention, the number of students who ranked social studies as their least favorite subject dropped from thirty-one percent to eight percent. The twenty-three percent change in students not ranking social studies as their least favorite subject is quite an accomplishment. Obviously, students are more engaged in subjects they like, and less students rating social studies as their least favorite subject shows an increase in student affinity for social studies.

The second piece of data in this study is the survey in which students responded to statements about social studies. This survey was given before and after the curricular intervention. The changes in student responses to several of the statements also confirm that constructivist and cooperative learning activities improve student engagement in social studies. The initial responses to the statement “I am usually bored in social studies class” changed significantly in the second survey. The number of students that labeled that statement very true decreased from five to four. In another statement, “In social studies class, I learn about things I am interested in,” the number of students who felt the statement was very true rose from zero to one. Also, the number of students who felt the statement was “not true” fell from six to five. The way the responses to those two statements changed shows that when taught through constructivist and cooperative learning activities, students are bored less often and feel that they learn about what they are interested in more often.

The third data source is the observation rating scales that were completed after each of the eleven social studies lessons that were part of the intervention. The rating scale, which can be found in Appendix B, features five behaviors related to engagement. After each social studies lesson, the researcher responded to each part of the rating scale according to whether or not the students in the classroom exhibited the behavior most of the time, about half of the time, or seldom. The results of this rating scale indicate that throughout the course of the intervention, the students were actively engaged in social studies.

During the lessons, the students never appeared to lack attentiveness, interest, and motivation. In fact, during the majority of the lessons (fifty-five percent), the students

appeared attentive, interested, and motivated virtually all of the time. In addition, the students never contributed to class infrequently. Sixty-three percent of lessons occurred with students contributing most of the time, and thirty-eight percent of lessons occurred with students contributing about half the time. During independent work, the students worked diligently most of the time throughout each and every lesson. In group work, the students worked diligently most of the time during sixty-seven percent of lessons and worked diligently about half the time during thirty-three percent of lessons. The final part of the rating scale is in regards to how often the students exhibited off-task behaviors. Only nine percent of the lessons featured such behaviors most of the time; eighteen percent of the lessons featured them about half the time and seventy-two percent of the lessons featured them seldom.

The first four categories on the rating scale feature behaviors that are associated with being engaged in a particular subject. The results in each of those categories show that students exhibited such behaviors often during the lessons. During the majority of each of those lessons, the behaviors that show engagement occurred most of the time. In the final part of the rating scale, which encompasses behaviors that are not associated with engagement, such behaviors occurred seldom seventy-two percent of the time. The results of the observations are extremely telling. They show that when taught social studies through constructivist and cooperative learning teaching strategies, students show behaviors associated with engagement the majority of the time. They show behaviors associated with a lack of engagement rarely.

The fourth and final data source is the interviews of the two classroom teachers that were conducted before the curricular intervention. In the interviews, both teachers



explained that they use a great variety of materials and teaching techniques when teaching social studies, including maps, the internet, literature, and projects. When asked about their students' perceptions of social studies, both teachers stressed that their students are interested in social studies and view it as an important subject. These interviews are important to take into account, because not only did this study take place in a classroom in which a great deal of resources were used to teach social studies, it took place in a classroom in which, from the teachers' points of view, the students were already engaged in social studies. The curricular intervention, which consisted of integrating cooperative learning and constructivist teaching strategies and activities into social studies, was able to make the students even more engaged than they previously were.

In summary, the research done throughout this study signifies that constructivist and cooperative learning teaching strategies do lead to a rise in student engagement in social studies. The observations of student engagement during the study show that the students exhibited behaviors that indicate engagement frequently, and exhibited behaviors that indicate a lack of engagement infrequently. In addition, the way the students responded to statements about social studies shows that constructivist and cooperative learning teaching strategies decreased boredom and increased students learning about what they are interested in. Finally, after being taught through constructivist and cooperative learning techniques, students were twenty-three percent less likely to rate social studies as their least favorite subject.

## Limitations of Study

Despite the fact that this study is very telling, there are several limitations that apply to it. This study was conducted between March 30, 2007 and May 2, 2007. That is a relatively short period of time. Accordingly, this study can only be considered a snapshot in time and student responses may change over time. Whether or not the results of this study are sustainable remains to be seen.

In addition to the short time period of this study, the sample size of the study was small. Only two teachers were interviewed about their social studies instruction. In addition, thirteen students participated in data collection by completing surveys which represents a relatively small sample. The changes in the results on each survey definitely show an increase of student engagement, but the small sample size is something that cannot be ignored. In the first survey in which the students responded to seven statements about social studies, many of the student responses to the statements changed in such a way that would indicate an increase in engagement. However, it must be pointed out that the changes that occurred were the result of just one or two changed responses to the statements.

Not only was the sample size of this study small, the study occurred in a single school on a single grade level. The intervention improved student engagement in social studies in the sixth grade classroom at Lincoln School in Delta Township, but how it would have affected different grade levels at different schools remains to be seen.

The final limitation of this study is subjectivity. The rating scale that was filled out at the completion of each of the lessons was based on the researcher's observations. It is unavoidable that observations are subjective in nature. They are based on what the

researcher saw, and of course it would have been impossible for the researcher to see each and every thing that went on during social studies lessons.

### Implications for the Future

Future research on this subject matter has limitless potential. If future research is to be done, it would be beneficial if it included a larger sample size and longer time period. Also, if further research is done, it should be done not only in different school districts but on different grade levels as well. If studies are done on more grade levels, they may be able to show if constructivist and cooperative learning techniques increase engagement in social studies across grade levels.

In addition, it would be interesting to study the affect of constructivist and cooperative learning techniques on student engagement separately. If individual studies examined how student engagement is affected by such strategies separately, it may show which teaching technique leads to a greater increase in student engagement. If that were to be done, it could shed light on which type of teaching technique is truly the best fit for social studies.

### Implications for the Profession

Teachers trying to learn from this study should recognize that the results show that student engagement increased when students were taught using constructivist and cooperative learning activities and strategies. Engagement is an extremely important part of each and every school day and each and every subject. When students are engaged, they pay more attention, are more motivated, and are more successful. Keeping students

engaged should be a goal of all teachers. Chapter two outlines the many problems associated with students' lack of engagement in social studies. If cooperative learning and constructivism are teaching methods that can help reduce this problem, then they should be used to teach social studies. I recommend that current practitioners seriously consider adopting these methods.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Teacher Interview

1. What resource do you most commonly use to teach social studies?
2. What additional resources, if any, do you include in social studies instruction?  
How frequently do you include them?
3. What kinds of lessons does your social studies instruction usually consist of?
4. How often does your social studies instruction include the following:  
independent activities, partner activities, cooperative groups?
5. Do you feel your students are more or less engaged in social studies than they are  
in other subjects?
6. How do you think your students perceive social studies? Do you think they view  
social studies as more, less, or equally important as other subjects?



## APPENDIX B

### Observation of Student Engagement Rating Scale

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Lesson: \_\_\_\_\_

1. During the lesson, the students appeared attentive, interested, and motivated (paying attention, answering questions, making eye contact, etc.):

1 – most of the time                  2 – about half of the time                  3- seldom

2. During class discussions and/or questioning, the students contributed:

1 – most of the time                  2 – about half of the time                  3- seldom

3. During independent work, the students worked diligently and with little distraction:

1 – most of the time                  2 – about half of the time                  3- seldom

4. During group work and assignments, the students worked diligently and with little distraction:

1 – most of the time                  2 – about half of the time                  3- seldom

5. During the lesson, the students exhibited and/or performed off-task behaviors (drawing, talking, not paying attention etc.):

1 – most of the time                  2 – about half of the time                  3- seldom

APPENDIX C

Student Survey: School Subjects

Look at the subjects in the box. Which do you most enjoy learning in school?

Reading	Health	Social Studies
Writing	Math	Science

Write your favorite subject on line number 1.

Write your second favorite subject on line number 2.

Continue until your least favorite subject is on line number 6.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

Why is subject #1 your favorite? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Why is subject #6 your least favorite? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from Blanken, 1999

## APPENDIX D

### Student Survey: About Social Studies

Directions: Below are some statements about social studies. Read each statement. Decide how true you think it is and mark the sentence that shows your opinion. There are no right or wrong answers!

1. All I do in social studies class is read the textbook.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is very true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is pretty true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is a little true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is not true.

2. In social studies class, students have to think a lot.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is very true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is pretty true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is a little true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is not true.

3. Learning social studies is useful.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is very true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is pretty true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is a little true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is not true.

4. Learning social studies is enjoyable.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is very true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is pretty true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is a little true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is not true.

5. In social studies class, students do fun and interesting projects.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is very true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is pretty true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is a little true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is not true.

6. I am usually bored in social studies class.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is very true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is pretty true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is a little true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is not true.

7. In social studies class, I learn about things I am interested in.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is very true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is pretty true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is a little true.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement is not true.

