Social studies in the elementary grades: a child's right

Aimée Mizuno
California State University, Monterey Bay

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Social Studies in the Elementary Grades: A Child's Right

By

Aimée Mizuno

Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

California State University at Monterey Bay

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Social Studies in the Elementary Grades: A Child's Right

By

Aimée Mizuno

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

S. M. Serna
GRADUATE ADVISOR

5/5/14

Dr. Lou Dentí
CULMINATING MAE PROJECT INSTRUCTOR

5-7-14
Abstract

This action research examined the use of two different types of social studies teaching and curricula. While one group of third grade students received a constructivist critical literacy type of instruction, another third grade class received textbook based instruction. The study compared student academic performance, attitudes and engagement between the two groups as well as the impact of the differing teaching methods on myself as the teacher. Data sources included student end of unit test scores, student questionnaires and focus groups, reflective teaching journals and teacher observations. The study findings include higher academic performance for the constructivist learning group, mixed findings on student attitudes toward and engagement with social studies, as well as student preference for group work activities.

*Keywords*: social studies, constructivist, critical literacy
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Chapter 1: Statement of Purpose and Overview

Introduction

The impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and the accompanying high stakes testing has left the teaching of elementary social studies without clear classroom implementation procedures nor specificity on inclusion in the course sequence. Since the advent of NCLB social studies instruction has long been considered of secondary importance along with science, as teachers were mandated to place doubled emphasis on language arts and math. Surveys have shown that instructional time allocated to social studies has decreased in many states (O’Connor, Heafner & Groce, 2007; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color have had to bear the brunt of this neglect of social studies instruction. While students in more advantaged communities have continued to have access to instruction in geography, civics and history, low-income and low performing schools have often sidelined these lessons altogether (Pace, 2007).

Most of the students in my school setting are Latinos of low socioeconomic backgrounds. The majority of the students are also English Language Learners. The families are for the most part are farmworkers in the agricultural fields surrounding the town. With the advent of the implementation of the Common Core Standards in California schools, it is increasingly necessary for students to understand complex non-fictional texts, analyze them and utilize them for different purposes. Students who are able to do so will be more prepared for college, whereas those who are not exposed to this type of curriculum and learning may not be ready to tackle college level academics. It becomes apparent that English Language Learners, student of color and students at risk of school failure be marginalized and disproportionately affected. In addition,
as California and the nation become more and more diverse and People of Color become the majority, students need to be exposed to both the social and cultural contexts of their own people and the diverse groups in their local and national communities (Au, 2006; Bigelow, 1999).

Why does social studies matter, particularly in the early elementary grades? What does effective, meaningful and challenging social studies teaching look like? What can teachers do to bring this type of teaching to their students? These are questions that I addressed through this study.

**Problem Statement**

Currently in California public elementary schools, quality social studies instruction continues to be undervalued in comparison to other academic subjects. The focus on high stakes testing has increased the emphasis on mathematics and language arts over social studies. Instructional time for social studies has decreased markedly after the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act. Furthermore, the type of social studies teaching that is occurring is often aligned with standardized tests, which emphasizes memorization of isolated facts over critical historical understanding and investigation. It is this historical understanding of social studies themes that is of utmost importance because as students become adults, they will not only be expected to know the basics of geography, civics, history, but to be active community members and citizens. According to Au (2006) and Bigelow (1999), without knowledge of how communities, governments and economies work, these adults will be relegated to the status of second-class citizens and will not be able to fully participate in this democracy. Therefore, there is a need for social studies teaching in the elementary school curriculum requiring students to critically look at history, civics, geography and culture and make meaning of the content. In
addition, the primary focus of instruction should be implementing pedagogy that actively engages students with the curriculum. The purpose of this research was to bring curricular attention back to social studies and to investigate and implement methods of elementary social studies teaching based in constructivism and critical pedagogy. Through the study I hoped to answer the following questions: What is the effect of incorporating constructivist critical literacy based social studies teaching in elementary classrooms? What are the effects of this type of teaching on student achievement, engagement and attitudes? What are the impacts of this type of teaching on myself as an educator?

**Purpose**

The goal of this project was to improve my own social studies teaching as well as improve student knowledge of geography, civics and history. In addition to increasing student knowledge and achievement in the content area, I hoped to improve student engagement, comfort and confidence with the subject matter. I chose this goal because as a beginning teacher I realized how little time teachers were allowed to teach social studies at the third grade level and across grade levels in the district. I was surprised at the lack of student knowledge of civics, geography and history.

The problem regarding the lack of student knowledge of social studies themes is important because as students become adults, they will not only be expected to know the basics of geography, civics, history etc, but they will become members of the larger society. Without knowledge of how communities, governments and economies work, these adults will be relegated to the status of second-class citizens and will not be able to fully participate in this democracy (Au, 2006; Bigelow, 1999).
To address the problems at hand, my third grade teaching colleagues and decided to create a social studies curriculum that addresses was hands on and student centered, while addressing the curriculum standards. This inquiry-based, constructivist curriculum was designed to address students’ need to interact with the world. While a group of students (one third grade class) received this type of inquiry-based, constructivist instruction, another third grade class received textbook based instruction. I compared student progress, attitudes and engagement between the two groups.

Research Questions

Through my action research project I addressed the following research questions.

- What is the impact of the inquiry based, critical literacy method of social studies teaching on the 3rd grade students with respect to:
  - end-of-unit assessment scores
  - student attitude toward social studies
  - student engagement

- What is the impact of constructivist based critical literacy teaching on me as an educator?

Theoretical Model

The theoretical model guiding my lesson planning for the inquiry based, critical literacy approach was based on Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath’s (2013) Social Justice Oriented Social Studies Framework. The five steps of this framework include the following: 1.) Inspiring wonder 2.) Painting the picture 3.) Application 4.) Connecting the past to the present and 5.) Facilitating Change.
The first step, inspiring wonder, involves initial activities that spark the students’ interest and provoke questions. These activities include visual presentations, role plays, and KWL (Know, Want to Know and Learned) charts. In the second step, painting the picture, historical content is introduced to the students in the form of quality children’s literature, plays, photographs, primary sources and interactive simulations. Application requires students to use the content knowledge and the historical inquiry skills they have gained to synthesize information, draw conclusions and present their learning to a larger audience. In the next step, connecting the past to present, students are asked to make connections between current issues and events and historical events. Finally, with facilitating change, the teacher guides the student in taking action to speak out on issues that they have encountered through the social studies learning. This can include letter writing, community organizing and educating others about particular issues.

The constructivist model of teaching and learning, which is particularly relevant to social studies education, also guided my teaching of the social studies unit (Sunal & Haas, 2002). This model of teaching encompasses the theoretical foundational thought laid out by Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky stated that for students to make meaning from prior knowledge, they must be taught in the zone of their proximal development. In contrast to the didactic or knowledge transmission model of learning, constructivists see learning as an active process of creating meaning (Nie & Lau, 2010). In addition, knowledge can be constructed by the learner through the processing of content as well as through conversations and interactions.

According to Sunal and Haas, there are four main components to constructivist Social Studies teaching: 1.) Understanding concepts 2.) Understanding generalizations 3.) Developing higher level thinking skills and 4.) Developing attitudes and dispositions about the social world.
In contrast to the knowledge transmission model, constructivism calls for critical analysis and student responsibility in learning. As teachers, we are responsible for creating lessons that follow the model’s lesson-learning phases cycle model. The phases include: 1) Exploratory introduction 2.) Development and 3.) Expansion. Furthermore, the theory outlines 7 inquiry skills that should be developed in social studies learning. The inquiry skills include: 1.) Observing 2.) Communicating 3) Classifying 4) Inferring 5) Predicting 6) Measuring and estimating and 7) Integrative skills.

**Researcher Background**

I have been working in the field of education since I graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in Japanese Studies from Wellesley College in 2004. For the first two years after graduating from college, I spent time volunteering with an educational non-profit in Michoacan, Mexico, as well as with AmeriCorps programs in South Boston and in Watsonville, California. Through AmeriCorps, I was able to gain experience working in a Montessori pre-school for working class Irish American children and then with Latino students from farmworker families at a public elementary school. My experiences working with children as a literacy tutor inspired me to enter the multiple subjects teaching credential at CSUMB from 2008 to 2009. After receiving my credential, I worked first as a nutrition and garden science teacher, and then as a third grade teacher in the Alisal Union School District for three years. Currently, I am a reading intervention teacher in the Pajaro Valley Unified School District in Watsonville.

My identity as a mixed race and multilingual Japanese American woman as well as social justice educator has been integral to my experiences as a teacher. I am committed to working with low income students of color and to using curriculum and methods that address
multiculturalism and social justice issues. In my teaching contexts, I seek to create democratic learning communities that value the backgrounds and rights of every student. I also believe in the importance of being involved in the larger community and take pleasure in attending, planning and participating in community events in Watsonville. In the summers, I teach about the Japanese American Internment and immigration history at Kokoro no Gakko, a summer Japanese culture program for children. During the school year, I enjoy being a volunteer story time reader at the public library and taking part in activities that support immigrant and worker rights.

I am conducting this research in the hopes of contributing to the general body of knowledge in the field of social studies education as well as add to the teaching practices and resources available to the teachers in my school district. In turn, my colleagues and I will be able to provide rich, constructivist, student centered social studies curriculum that will affirm student identity, build critical thinking skills and increase civic community participation.

Definition of Terms

Historical Thinking - A set of reasoning skills that one acquires through the study of history including chronological thinking, analysis and decision making (Salinas, Franquiz & Guberman, 2006).

Document Based Questions - A series of questions asked about primary and secondary historical sources such as photographs, texts, graphs and charts (Salinas et al., 2006).

Multiple Perspective Taking - The ability to understand an issue from various
points of view (Salinas & Guberman, 2006).

Place Based Education - Type of learning in which a student’s community becomes the main resource of learning. It strives to solve community problems through student initiated projects (Beames & Ross, 2010; Groce & Poling, 2013).

No Child Left Behind - An U.S. Act of Congress initially passed in 2001 that requires schools to assess student progress through annual testing, annual academic progress, school report cards, teacher qualifications and funding changes based on school progress (Au, 2006).

Constructivism - A set of learning theories based on belief that individuals construct meanings from their environment. It is the basis for hands on, inquiry based, and collaborative learning models (Sunal & Haas, 2002).

Inquiry - The process of asking questions and investigating possible solutions/answers (Sunal et al, 2002).

Critical literacy - A type of reading of text stemming from Marxist Critical pedagogy which requires individuals to critically examine, analyze and uncover underlying messages (Soares & Wood, 2010).

Common Core Standards - An U.S. education reform movement moving toward
aligning various state academic standards with nation-wide common core standards.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The decline of the teaching of social studies in the elementary grades has been well documented. With the pressures of high-stakes standardized testing, teachers, particularly in low-income, low-performing schools, are pressured to focus on mathematics and language arts, sideling the teaching of subjects including the arts, science and social studies. In 2010, *Social Education*, published Frederick Risinger’s open letter to Barack Obama calling attention to the marginalization of social studies in the pre-k through 12th grade curriculum. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, wrote a subsequent article referring to the letter, stating his support for social studies and surprisingly, acknowledging that high stakes testing linked to No Child Left Behind was the cause of the sideling of the subject (Risinger, 2012). However, as of yet, there have been no Education Department initiatives to bring social studies back from this low status.

The following is a review of the literature pertaining to my research on constructivist, critical literacy based methods of teaching social studies at the elementary school level. My research focuses specifically on the effects of this type of teaching on student achievement, attitudes toward social studies and overall engagement in the lessons. In addition to the effects on the students, I investigate the impact on my own teaching practice and identity as a teacher. This literature review focuses on the themes derived from each of my research questions:

- What is the impact of constructivist based critical pedagogy teaching for a social studies unit on a third grade class with respect to:
  - end-of-unit test scores?
  - student attitude toward social studies?
  - student engagement?
• What is the impact of constructivist based critical literacy teaching on me as an educator?

First, I review studies on the impact of the federal No Child Left Behind legislations on the teaching of social studies in the elementary grades. Second, I examine studies on constructivist social studies teaching, including a description of the theory, pedagogical frameworks and practical strategies for how it can be taught. Third, I focus on literature pertaining to critical literacy and the teaching of social studies, also including the history, frameworks and strategies for teaching. Next, I explore both the affective and academic impacts of critical constructivist teaching on students. Finally, I discuss the studies focusing on the impact of this pedagogy on teacher identity and praxis.

**Social Studies in the Age of No Child Left Behind**

One pertinent issue in the teaching of elementary social studies is the effect of high stakes testing on the amount of instructional minutes allocated to the subject. Several studies have shown that the instructional minutes for social studies have decreased noticeably since the passing of NCLB (O’Connor, Heafner & Groce 2007; Heafner & Fitchett 2012). O’Connor cited data such as the following from the 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) teacher survey. The results showed that 37 percent of U.S. fourth graders spent only 1 to 2 hours per week on social studies, 31 percent spent 2 to 3 hours, and 19 percent spent more than 3 hours. However, 73 percent of fourth graders spent 4 or more hours on mathematics (O’Connor et al, 2007, p2).

In 2012, Heafner & Fitchett further examined the impact of No Child Left Behind Legislation on elementary Social Studies teaching using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics research. This quantitative analysis with data spanning fifteen years
(from 1993 to 2008) found that federally mandated testing of English Language Arts and mathematics in grades third through fifth had indeed lowered the instructional times for Social Studies. Specifically, the authors found that instructional time for social studies in grades three through five had decreased by fifty-six minutes per week over the fifteen-year period. The greatest decrease occurred during the past ten years when the NCLB testing was first put into place and then re-authorized. These two studies suggest strongly that teachers, feeling the pressures of No Child Left Behind, are spending less and less time on teaching Social Studies.

**Effect on pedagogy.** In light of the studies showing the decline of instructional minutes for Social Studies, some scholars have argued for Social Studies to be included as a tested subject under NCLB (Savage 2003, as cited in Au, 2009). Proponents of the testing of Social Studies argue that including the material in state tests would ensure that the subject would be given equal emphasis along with Math and Language Arts. On the other hand, opponents of state assessment for social studies believe that testing would have a detrimental effect (Au, 2009; Bigelow 1999).

Au (2009) opposed state assessment of social studies for the following reasons: It would a.) endorse a test for all subjects b.) accept the content norms of testing c.) assume the validity of standardized tests in measuring learning and d.) ignore the racial and class inequalities in standardized testing. In addition, Au argued that if the class content mirrored current assessment styles, the classes would become more about memorizing historical facts and listening to teacher lectures rather than analyzing texts from a critical literacy perspective and participating in student centered activities. If elementary students were tested in social studies, the teaching could certainly follow in this trend. Teacher pedagogy could be altered to emphasize “rote memorization and lower order thinking as the tests themselves are usually structured to assess
breadth of often shallow fragment bits of knowledge” (Au, 2009 p46). In this way, students would come to believe that history was a collection of dates and facts, rather than a complex interplay of geography, cultures as well as social and economic factors.

Bigelow (2009) is also an opponent of high stakes assessment of Social Studies. He addressed the consequences of the 1998 decision by the Department of Education in Oregon to institute statewide social studies assessments. Bigelow criticized the assessments for their lack of critical sensibility and multicultural orientation, and for misrepresenting social realities. Bigelow concluded that the assessments undermined teachers’ efforts to create a rich multicultural curriculum because they implicitly supported the memorizing of isolated facts over critically analyzing pertinent social/historical issues.

Bigelow gave examples from his teaching that exemplify and support the pedagogy of critical literacy in social studies. For example, he described a roleplay of the 1848 Seneca Falls, New York, women’s rights conference that he organized for his high school students which included the presence (an example of using historical imagination) of African American, Native American and Mexican Women as well as poor white women, who were not included in the original event. From this example, he showed how students would be able to develop a deeper understanding of feminism and the historical context behind it, in contrast to a multiple choice question on the state exam that asked which constitutional amendment gave women the right to vote.

Constructivist Social Studies Teaching

**Theory and framework.** The constructivist model of teaching and learning is particularly relevant to elementary Social Studies education (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003; Obenchain,
Orr & Pennington; 2010; Sunal & Haas, 2005; Yilmaz, 2008). In contrast to the traditional knowledge transmission model of education, which posits that knowledge can be transmitted from a textbook or by a teacher, constructivism calls for critical analysis and student responsibility in learning. The pedagogy assumes that knowledge is constructed internally and influenced by sociocultural factors. Students are given the opportunity to participate in inquiry based, concrete experiences that invite them to construct their own meaning, while the teacher acts as a facilitator of these learning experiences (Sunal et al, 2005; Yilmaz, 2008). Specifically in the application to social studies teaching, the purpose of learning shifts from a “search for truth to one of a search for perspective (Doolittle et al, 2003)”.

Educational theorists have outlined four main components to constructivist Social Studies teaching: 1.) understanding concepts 2.) understanding generalizations 3.) developing higher level thinking skills and 4.) developing attitudes and dispositions about the social world (Sunal et al, 2005). In addition, Yilmaz (2008) synthesized five core principles as the foundation for constructivist pedagogy. These include student centered teaching, group dialogue, introduction of domain knowledge, critical analysis of texts and other materials, and development of student metacognition. As teachers, we are responsible for creating lessons that follow the model’s lesson-learning phases cycle model. The phases include: 1.) Exploratory introduction 2.) Development and 3.) Expansion.

**Strategies for constructivist social studies teaching.** Many educational practitioners have examined the implementation of constructivist teaching in the social studies (Barrett; Beames & Ross, 2010; Cadwell & Weisemen, 2005; Grace, Poling & Wilson, 2013; Guberman & Salinas, 2006; Michels & Maxwell, 2000; Zaleski & Zinnel 2013). They have used methods
including story telling (Liebert, 1999; Osborne, 2000), family history gathering (McCall & Ristow, 2003), field trips (Groce et al., 2013), historical inquiry (Salinas, Franquiz & Guberman, 2006) place-based education and local history (Beames et al., 2010; Michels et al., 2000; Wieseman et al, 2005), technology and digital history (Kelle, Faure & Ray, 2013; Manfra & Coven, 2011; Staley, 2000) problem based learning (Carlson & Holm, 1999; Kincheloe, 1985) and developing social imaginations through quality children’s literature (Zaleski et al., 2013.)

In particular, Salinas, Franquiz and Guberman (2006) advocated for a type of Social Studies teaching that incorporates the historical inquiry process, multicultural literature, as well as visual aids, document based questions (DBQ’s) and graphic organizers. The authors argued for a type of teaching that allows immigrant children to acquire English, social studies content, and the skills necessary for participatory citizenship. Multicultural literature such as Cuadros de mi Familia (Garza, 1990 as cited in Salinas et al, 2006) and Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez (Krull, 2003, as cited in Salinas et al, 2006) were listed as examples of texts that connected students’ backgrounds with important historical events and promoted multiple perspective taking. The use of photographs as primary sources was given as a way to introduce students to a variety of historical information, make comparisons, sequence events, identify cause and effect and pose questions. In addition, the authors argue that presenting Document Based Questions (DBQ’s) along with the photographs, helped students to participate in meaningful discussions and to “know, comprehend, apply, synthesize, analyze and evaluate history (Salinas et al, 2006, p206).”

Soares and Wood (2010) took one step further, by laying out the research, theory and practice for a type of social studies teaching that incorporates critical literacy as students examine current social justice issues. This evaluative report first provided justifications for
teaching social studies from a global perspective and secondly for students to examine social studies content critically. In the final portion of the article the authors described a literature based social studies curriculum model first introduced by Ciardiello. The model centered around the following five themes: a.) taking multiple perspectives b.) finding authentic voice c.) recognizing social barriers d.) finding one’s identity and e.) the “call to service.” The authors also provided examples of resources/literary texts that can be used for each theme. For example, to explore the theme of multiple perspective taking, recommended the book, *Only What We Can Carry* (Inada, 2000 as cited in Soares & Wood, 2010) for students to explore civil rights for interned Japanese Americans during World War II from the perspectives of interned children. Like Bigelow and Salinas, Soares and Wood, call for a social re-constructionist model for Social Studies teaching that is relevant to today’s diverse body of students.

A prime example of constructivist place-based education is a project conducted in Edinburgh, Scotland, with 33 participants between the ages of 8 and 11 called *Outdoor Journeys* (Beames & Ross, 2010.) In this case study, the authors explored the rationale for place-based learning, including the pedagogical discourses of formal schooling and the call for students to work in “learner relevant and real-life contexts, where they can rediscover, ‘re-inhabit’ or conserve their local place, community and traditions (Gruenwald 2003 quoted in Beames and Ross 96). The authors argue for a type of outdoor education that moves away from compartmentalized “adrenaline filled activities” with more “sustainable, local, broad adventures” over longer periods of time with responsibility and choice placed on the students themselves (p. 97). Including this first tenet of “journeys,” they call for a second tenet, which embraces place-based curriculum in opposition to universal activities that are not specific to student location. The third tenet is a learner-negotiated pedagogy versus an instructor driven one (p. 98).
methodology for the study was a qualitative case study model, with the authors conducting group interviews and analyzing the data to draw conclusions. This is a model that I will modify and adapt in my research. The journeys included exploring the school grounds and the surrounding neighborhood. The findings of the study include the following three themes. 1.) Students were able to learn about different subject areas at the same time through comprehensive, inter-curricular journeys, 2.) given the power to guide their learning by generating questions and planning the journeys and 3.) able to learn about aspects of the local landscape (p. 101-103).

Another more specific case study illustrating place-based learning is a study of a class trip to a local cemetery (Groce, Wilson & Poling, 2013). The authors promote cemetery visits as an opportunity to combine study of “economics, religion, geography, immigration history, and public health (p. 14)”. They outline the way that such visits can be planned, carried out and debriefed. After introducing the trip and having conversations about the history and historical purpose of cemeteries to provide a context for the visit, teachers assigned roles such as “cartographers, reporters, photographers, and tool supervisors” and explained their roles during the trip (p. 15). During the visits, students used mathematics, science and social studies skills to analyze their observations. They also recorded and took notes, and generated further questions about the socioeconomics of the population. After the visit, groups were given time to complete designated tasks such as completing further research, creating presentations and refining their field maps (p. 16). One student concluded the following after her visit. “I found out that just knowing the answer is not enough. I understood better when I found out the reason for the answer (p. 16).” The authors concluded that students were able to make reasonable assumptions from the data and observations they collected and make hypotheses based on their research.
Critical Literacy and Social Studies Teaching

History of critical literacy. A significant component of my research project is based in Critical Pedagogy, a theoretical framework made famous by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Joan Wink (2000) summarizes the definitions of key terms in the Freirian pedagogy, outlines the historical background, and gives concrete examples of how this pedagogy can be put into action. A particularly pertinent chapter in this volume is entitled, “So How Do You Do Critical Pedagogy?” This section calls educators to follow the process “to name, to critically reflect, and to act.” Wink writes, “transformative teaching and learning is founded on the principle that theory and practice are joined to form praxis (p. 122).” She points out that the process of “problem posing” is critical to this practice. She names four principles of problem posing: 1.) trust each other 2.) believe that their involvement will matter 3.) understand resistance and institutional barriers to change and 4.) are aware of their own power and knowledge. In addition, there are three tenets to the teacher’s role in problem posing. Teachers must create a safe place for it (problem posing) to happen, ask hard questions for the students’ musing, and assist students with codification (p. 125.) Furthermore, the author continues to flesh out the codification process along Freire’s guidelines. 1.) The code is a whole story, picture or film. 2.) The code is based on student lives. 3.) Learners identify and solve real life problems. 4.) Learners work cooperatively to solve community problems. 5.) The goal is literacy for learners. 6.) The goal is for teachers and learners to empower themselves. With every lesson and unit, these guidelines should be followed. Finally, Wink summarizes the phases of the problem-posing process introduced by Freeman and Freeman (1992.) First, the problem must be focused on the students’ own experience. Secondly, the students must identify, investigate and pose a problem within their own lives. Third, students must solve the problem together. Finally, learners need to
make a plan to act on the problem posed.

**Strategies for critical literacy and social studies teaching.** The work of researcher Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath (2013) is particularly instructive in moving beyond the theories of critical literacy and multicultural education to lay out specific a framework for teaching. This framework addresses the teaching of social studies, literacy and social justice, keeping in mind the additional concern of the Common Core Standards. She focuses her work on how teachers can “transform and restructure mandated social studies curriculum to teach from a critical, social justice perspective (p. 2.) Arguing that social studies has the capacity to become “a platform for critical thought, investigatory thinking and social change,” Agarwal-Rangnath lays out a five step framework to realize this social justice-oriented curriculum (p. 6). The steps include: 1.) Inspiring Wonder, 2.) Painting the Picture, 3.) Application, 4.) Connecting the Past to the Present, and 5.) Facilitating Change. The method of social studies instruction that I will be implementing as a comparison to traditional textbook based teaching, will follow this framework and include many activities that she describes. These activities include artifact analysis, guided simulation, role-play, dialogue poems, and letter writing.

**Academic Impact of Critical/Constructivist Pedagogy**

Although there are few studies on the impact of Critical Constructivist Pedagogy specifically on social studies teaching, there are studies which show the academic effect of such teaching methods on other subject areas including mathematics, English language and science. A study of sixth graders in Korea found that students taught mathematics using the constructivist method obtained higher academic scores than students taught using the traditional method (Kim,
2005.) A similar study of sixth grade students from rural areas in Illinois found that the constructivist teaching did not lead to higher academic achievement on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (Grady, Watkins & Montalvo, 2012). An additional study in Singapore of 3,000 ninth graders learning the English language found that didactic instruction was negatively associated with academic achievement, while constructivist teaching with focuses on “elaboration, discussion, deep understanding and real world connectedness,” was positively associated with student achievement (Nie & Lau, 2010, p410).”

**Affective Impact of Critical/Constructivist Pedagogy**

Students’ negative perceptions of social studies have concerned educators for many decades. Studies have shown that students do not understand the necessity and importance of social studies as a subject, find it to be un-engaging and do not see it as relevant to their everyday lives (Hoge & Zhao, 2005.) The reasons for students’ negative perceptions of social studies may include teaching methodology and curriculum as well as teacher attitudes. By introducing problem based and constructivist learning models, teachers of fourth grade students in a Midwestern community were able to improve student attitudes toward social studies and student engagement (Blanken, 1999). One study of a sixth grade teacher over the course of six months showed that she was able to improve her students’ attitudes toward the subject, primarily not by changing her methods, but by her teaching style, or how she treated the students (McGowan & Sutton, 1990.)

There is limited research on the effect of constructivist and critical pedagogy on student attitude toward social studies. Findings from one of the few studies on the topic, investigating the impact of constructivist teaching on fifth graders in Turkey, showed that the teaching method
increased students’ academic success and retention in social studies but did not increase students' attitudes (Gultekin & Karaduman, 2007.) A study in Utah used local history study with problem-based learning (Wieseman & Cadwell, 2005.) A teacher in Gunnison Valley, Colorado, studied the changing nature of human communities living in their valley. She sought to emphasize the use of higher level thinking skills and reasoning, such as “figuring out why people migrate, what factors affect settlement, how humans are interdependent with the physical environment, and what roles value systems and survival needs play in the interaction between human communities (p. 11.) She found the benefits of problem-based learning to be the enforcement of higher order thinking skills, cooperative and collaborative work, and high levels of engagement and excitement about learning (p.14.)

Impact of Critical/Constructivist Pedagogy on the Teacher

Researchers focusing on the impact of critical constructivist pedagogy on the teacher have found common themes including the challenges and the benefits of this type of instruction (Weisman & Cadwell, 2005; Willis, 2007; Yilmaz, 2008; Zaleski & Zinnel, 2013) as well as the importance of the reflection process (Christensen, Wilson, Anders, Dennis, Kirkland, Beacham & Warren, 2001).

Teachers who employed constructivist teaching for social studies instruction cited many organizational and planning challenges. For example, teachers using local history with problem based learning, found that researching the material for the unit, as well as creating reading materials that were at the appropriate reading levels for the students was time consuming (Weisman et al., 2005). An in depth analysis of interviews with elementary social studies teachers also found in addition to the constraint of time; large class sizes, lack of appropriate
training, student discomfort with more open ended activities and classroom management concerns prevented them from implementing constructivist activities (Yilmaz, 2008, p46).

In addition to the challenges, teachers found numerous benefits to constructivist teaching. Weisman and Cadwell (2005) found that the greatest benefit to the constructivist method was student excitement and engagement. A case study of a third grade teacher reflecting on a social justice oriented and learner centered unit on Columbus’ arrival in North America showed that students were able to build their social imaginations, develop empathy for people very different from themselves, connect the past to their everyday lives, and apply the concept of point of view to other historical topics (Zaleski et al. 2013).

Finally, Christensen et al. (2001) found that the process of structured reflection by teachers lead them to move away from the transmission model of teaching and toward constructivist, learner centered teaching. Teachers in this study concluded that they had “achieved an empowered teaching style” and could see “their social studies practice has transformed because of the process of reflection (p208).”

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I examined the key sources that relate to my research questions. It is clear that elementary Social Studies teaching faces many challenges in the climate of No Child Left Behind and high stakes testing. Teachers struggle to fit Social Studies into a daily schedule where tested subject matter takes precedence, and instructional minutes are increasingly controlled. Some researchers and advocates have called for the content area to be tested along with math, language arts and science, while others argue that this would come at a cost to pedagogy – leading to students only memorizing isolated facts instead of critically analyzing
historical issues. However, there is a quite a large body of literature that addresses the ways in which constructivist and critical pedagogy can and is used to teach effective social studies. The next chapter will give an overview of the methods used to gather and analyze the data.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe the methods I used to gather and analyze data in relation to the following research questions:

• What is the impact of constructivist based critical pedagogy teaching for a social studies unit on a third grade class with respect to:
  - end-of-unit test scores?
  - student attitude toward social studies?
  - student engagement?

• What is the impact of constructivist based critical literacy teaching on me as an educator?

Overall Research Design

The overall research design I implemented was the action research model because, as Schmuck (2006) explains, opposed to traditional methods of research, action research allows teachers to engage in “self study and problem solving to increase local effectiveness” (p. 23). In terms of improving my own teaching practice and influencing those of my colleagues, this method of research appeared to be the most fitting.

Specific Research Plan

The specific type of action research conducted was proactive action research. This type of action research allows teachers to “build tentative theories to guide future steps in the change and improvement process (p. 23).” In short, action research allowed me as the teacher to reflect on my own practice, attempt new changes and incorporate these practices to grow as an educator.
As opposed to responsive action research, proactive action research involves taking action first, before collecting data. I followed the steps of proactive action research including: a.) listing hopes and concerns for new practice, b.) trying a new practice, c.) creating research procedures and collecting data, d.) analyzing data, e.) reflecting on alternative ways to behave and f.) fine tuning the practice or implementing a new practice (p. 32).

Action research can also utilize both quantitative and qualitative data to inform reflection and renewed action. Both types were used in this study. The basic quantitative data collection method was the end of unit test scores. The independent variable was the teaching method and the dependent variable was the student test scores. The qualitative data collection methods were student interviews in the form of focus groups and entries from my own reflection journal.

**Procedures in Detail**

**Setting.** M.W. Brown School is located in central coast California. The following information about community and school site was found on the city and school district websites.

**Community.** Oceanview is a small size city on the central coast of California. The city population is estimated to be about 52,000 and growing. The demographic breakdown according to the 2010 U.S. Census is as follows: 22,399 (43.7%) White, 358 (0.7%) African American, 629 (1.2%) Native American, 1,664 (3.3%) Asian, 40 (0.1%) Pacific Islander, 23,844 (46.6%) from other races, and 2,265 (4.4%) from two or more races. The Hispanic or Latino of population of any race was 41,656 persons (81.4%). As reported by the 2007-2011 American Community Survey, the median income for a household in the city was $46,073, and the median income for a family was $49,550. The per capita income for the city was $16,407. About 18.6% of families and 20.4% of the population were below the poverty line, including 27.6% of those under age 18.
and 15.6% of those age 65 or over. The city has a large population of young people, with 31.5% under the age of 18. Located in a valley bordered by a mountain range and the Pacific Ocean, the community is agricultural, and particularly known for producing various types of berries. The overwhelming majority of agricultural workers are documented and undocumented immigrants from Mexico.

School. M.S. Brown School is one of 16 public elementary schools in the school district. The school population includes 570 students, kindergarten through 5th grade. There is an average of three classrooms per grade level. Latino/Latina students make up 98% of the student population. The remaining percentage are White alone, and African American. About 89% of the students qualify for either the free or reduced price lunch programs. English Language Learners make up 63% of the student population. Eleven percent of the students received Special Education services within the past year. The school has 23 classroom teachers. Among these, two are Latina. Twenty-two teachers are female while one is male.

Participants

Classes. The classes in which I conducted the research were two third grade classes. The class taught using the traditional textbook method, Class A, had 30 students, 14 boys and 16 girls. Seven of the students were designated as English Only students (EO) while 23 students were English Learners (EO). Twenty-nine students were identified as Latino/a while one student was of mixed African American and Latino heritage. Three students received speech services. Due to scheduling conflicts with the reading intervention program and parent requests for non-participation, 23 students were able to participate from this class.
The class that received the constructivist critical literacy-based social studies instruction, Class B, was made up of 31 students, 13 boys and 18 girls. There were 21 students classified as English Learners. Among these, three were RFEP (Re-designated Fluent English Proficient.) Seven were monolingual English speakers. Two students receive speech services and 2 students qualified for the Migrant Program. All of the students were at least partly of Latino/a heritage. One student was part Native American. As with class A, due to scheduling conflicts with the reading intervention program and parent requests for non-participation, 25 students were able to participate from this class.

**Teachers.** Action research calls for teachers to be participants. In this study, there will be three teacher participants: myself (a Reading Intervention Teacher), and two of my colleagues, who are third grade classroom teachers.

- I am a mixed-race Japanese/Caucasian female with five years of teaching experience, including two years of teaching third grade, two years teaching reading intervention, and one year teaching nutrition and garden science. I have a bachelor’s degree in Japanese Studies and have a passion for social studies and multicultural education. I taught both sections of the third grade social studies classes - one taught using the didactic textbook-based method and the other taught using the inquiry-based critical pedagogy method.
- Roseanne is a third grade teacher who has over ten years of experience. She is a White female who is fluent in Spanish. She has extensive training and experience in all areas of teaching, including literacy and inquiry-based methods. She helped in the unit planning process and offered suggestions throughout the weeks of instruction.
• Kyla is a third grade teacher with eleven years of teaching experience. She is a White female and a monolingual English speaker. She has extensive experience teaching English Language Development and reading. She helped in giving background information about the individual students, including their interests and strengths.

Data Collection

Intervention. The intervention in this research involved using an inquiry- and critical literacy- based teaching method for a social studies unit on California Native Americans in one 3rd grade classroom. The unit was built with the following California History-Social Science Content Standards in mind:

CA H-SSCS 3.2 Students describe the American Indian nations in their local region long ago and in the recent past.

1. Describe national identities, religious beliefs, customs, and various folklore traditions.
2. Discuss the ways in which physical geography, including climate, influenced how the local Indian nations adapted to their natural environment (e.g., how they obtained food, clothing, tools).
3. Describe the economy and systems of government, particularly those with tribal constitutions, and their relationship to federal and state governments.
4. Discuss the interaction of new settlers with the already established Indians of the region.

The materials used in the unit included selections of California Reflections, the district-adopted social studies curriculum, as well as outside resources including films, children’s literature, websites and artifacts from a museum kit prepared by the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History. Each 40-minute class taught 3 times a week for 3 weeks, involved two different types of instruction for the two classes of students. Class A read selections from the textbook, answered questions from the text and completed workbook pages; while Class B completed took part in critical discussions, analyzed artifacts, and participated in a simulation activity.
**Implementation.** In order to carry out my research, I took the following steps. Prior to teaching the unit, I gathered resources and create lesson plans surrounding the unit theme of California Native Americans. On the first day of instruction, I administered a pretest to students in both classes. The pre-test consisted of 15 multiple-choice questions, 5 vocabulary matching questions and 4 open ended document based questions. Beginning on the second day of instruction, I taught a series of nine lessons. These lessons were taught three days a week, for three weeks. Each lesson was 40 minutes in length. At the end of the unit, I administered the post-test, which was identical to the pre-test, and asked students to complete a final survey on their attitudes about the social studies lesson. Finally I conducted an interview session with the focus group students from Class B.

**Data sources.** The quantitative data collected in this study included pre and post test data as well as student attitude surveys. The source for collecting quantitative data on academic achievement was the students’ scores on the end-of-unit test. The test was a 24-question test, which included multiple choice, vocabulary matching and document analysis type questions on California Native Americans. The first portion of the test was created by the curriculum publisher of *California Reflections* specifically to measure student progress on this teaching unit and content validity was assumed on this basis. The second quantitative data source was a 7-item survey measuring student attitudes toward social studies class developed by myself. I based this instrument on similar published instruments. My academic advisor, who is a veteran teacher educator and expert in literacy instruction and multicultural education, assessed the content validity of this instrument.
The qualitative data collected in this study were the student surveys, focus group interview and teacher reflection journal entries. The survey previously described included several open-ended questions that asked students to describe their own feelings and attitudes about the social studies lessons. This was included as a qualitative data source. In addition, after the unit of study, a group of 6 students were asked to participate in a group interview revolving around 4 open-ended focus questions. This was a brief interview, about 15 minutes in length. The final source of qualitative data was a reflective teaching journal. I wrote entries describing the activities conducted in each class and my reflections on the lessons. The descriptive narratives in the journal entries also track my own attitude shifts and adjustments to instruction.

Data Analysis

The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately in order to answer my research questions. The quantitative data was analyzed by comparing the posttest scores of Class A (taught using traditional, textbook method) and Class B (taught using the constructivist method.) This analysis consisted of a frequency distribution as well as descriptive statistics including the mean, mode, and range. The data from the student attitude survey was compared using a frequency distribution and bar graph.

The qualitative data was analyzed in the following ways. The open-ended questionnaire items and the focus group interview were be transcribed to prepare them for analysis and coding. I coded the reflective journal entries by using codes from my research questions and the emergent codes derived from looking at the accumulated data. Next, I examined the code list and looked for patterns across all data sources (survey, interviews and journal entries) and triangulated the data to identify patterns across the sources. The codes were then revised and
narrowed down repeatedly to determine the key themes that used to answer the research questions.

**Limitations/Threats to Internal Validity**

Although the procedures of the research sought to minimize threats to validity, some issues still emerged through the research process. One limitation is related to implementation fidelity. Since I have not been extensively trained in either inquiry-based or critical pedagogy teaching of social studies, my teaching may not have been as complete or effective as it could have been. I attempted to minimize this threat by having the classroom teacher observe my teaching throughout the unit and give me verbal feedback.

An additional limitation is experimenter bias. As I believe strongly in the effectiveness of the inquiry and critical pedagogy based approach, I may have inadvertently become biased toward this method of teaching and toward the success of one group of students. I attempted to minimize this threat by maintaining the anonymity of students as I graded the post-tests.

A final limitation to the study is the diffusion of treatment. Because the two groups of students were from the same school site, they may have spread knowledge or created different attitudes toward the lessons being taught. I attempted to minimize this limitation by only teaching the unit for a short period of time, in this case, only three weeks.

**Conclusion**

This section delineated the methods I used to gather and analyze the data from this study. The methodology involved both the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. The next section will use the data gathered from the study to outline the major findings.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the data gathered to investigate the following research questions:

- What is the impact of constructivist based critical pedagogy teaching for a social studies unit on a third grade class with respect to:
  - end-of-unit test scores?
  - student attitude toward social studies?
  - student engagement?

- What is the impact of constructivist based critical literacy teaching on me as an educator?

Results of Data Analysis

The data sources in this study included unit pre and posttests, student attitude surveys, a student focus group interview and my teacher reflection journal entries. In this section I will discuss the major findings of the study and give supporting evidence from the data collected. The three major findings included the following themes: 1.) Higher academic performance for the constructivist group. 2.) Students in both groups find group work to be the most engaging. 3.) Mixed findings regarding student attitudes toward social studies.

Finding #1 academic performance higher for constructivist group. The first major finding was that the students in the critical constructivist learning group, Group A, showed a higher level of academic performance than the textbook based learning group, Group B. This finding was supported by the results of the posttest (see Appendix A). When the students were
given the test as a pretest at the beginning of the unit, there was only a slight difference in the scores. The average score for Group A was 27% and that of Group B was 22%. However, the results of the posttest scores showed a significant difference between the two groups. On the posttest, the class average for Group A was 51%, while that of Group B was only 36%. This was a fifteen percent difference between the two classes (see Figure 1).

![Pretest and Posttest Scores](image)

**Figure 1** Average pretest and posttest scores

In addition, after analyzing the performance on the posttest it was found that although the results on the multiple choice section of the test were similar for both classes, the constructivist learning group gave more complete and descriptive responses to the Document Based Questions in the second portion of the test. For example, when asked to describe how Native Americans in California gathered and made food, one student from the constructivist group responded with the following statement. “They made rock ovens and fires. They gathered food by hunting and shaking oak trees to get acorns.” This response referred to specific information that we had discussed in class and included more than two descriptive details. In comparison, a student from the textbook group wrote, “By working together and by baskets.” This response was not specific
or descriptive. The student did not recall the information about hunting and gathering practices of various tribes that we had read about in the textbook.

In conclusion, the students’ scores on the end of unit test to measure their content knowledge about California Native Americans showed that the constructivist learning group outperformed their counterparts who had been taught with the textbook method. This difference in levels of academic performance were seen in both the multiple choice and written response portions of the test.

Finding #2 students in both instructional groups find group work, realia and visual materials to be the most engaging. The data from the research supported a second finding that students found group work, realia and visual materials to be the most engaging aspects of social studies class. One question from the student attitude surveys asked students to choose their favorite class activity from a list of four options (See Figure 2). The options were working in groups, reading the textbook, creating maps/models and writing reports. For both classes, the activity that received the most positive responses was working together in groups. Twelve students from each class chose this option. The choice that received the least positive responses was writing reports. No students from either group chose this option.
Data from the student focus group interviews also demonstrated that students enjoyed working with real objects as well as seeing and creating visual representations of material learned in class. When focus group students from the constructivist group were asked what activities they enjoyed most, they responded that they liked “when we got the stuff from the museum,” “painting the Native Americans’ homes,” and “the play” (see Figure 3 for more sample responses to focus group questions.) When the students were asked what activities they liked the least, the students responded that they didn’t like the “testing because the answers were difficult” and “writing” (Personal communication, February 28, 2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question: What were some activities that you enjoyed in social studies class?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question: What activities did you not enjoy?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3 &amp; 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student 5: I didn’t like writing.

**Question: What do you think overall about social studies as a subject? Is it interesting or not?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student 1</th>
<th>Interesting, because it shows a lot of things about the land… the people… and how they hunted and made clothes and also about the toys.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>I think it was really interesting to learn about their culture and how they used to speak and do things and made things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>I think it was interesting. The play was interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>It was interesting because we got to touch the museum objects and we got to paint and we got to learn about the Indians’ culture and we got to know about people in the past. It’s kind of like history.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question: What could the teacher do to make social studies more interesting?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student 1</th>
<th>I think more art.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Yeah!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>More art and more museum objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>More games.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3* Sample student responses for focus group interview.

In summary, the data from the student focus group interview and the attitude surveys showed that students were the most engaged when presented with group work, realia, and visual representations.

**Finding #3 mixed findings concerning student attitudes toward social studies.** The third major finding showed that there were conflicting results concerning student attitudes toward social studies. Data on the students’ affective views on social studies as a subject were gathered from the student surveys, focus group interview, and my reflective teaching journal entries. While students’ self-reporting of their attitudes was positive overall, my observations of the behavior and attitudes of students during class conflicted with this view, particularly for the textbook based group.

On the student survey, when students were asked how much they enjoyed the activities in social studies class, the majority of students in both classes reported that they enjoyed social studies “a lot” (see Figure 4). Twenty-two out of twenty-four students in the constructivist group
and twenty students out of twenty-four from the didactic group chose this option. Also, when asked about the difficulty level of the work in social studies class, the majority of students in both classes believed that the difficulty level of the work was “just right” (see Figure 5). Oddly, more students in Group B (6 students) reported that the work was too easy. These results seem to indicate that overall, both groups had very positive attitudes toward social studies.

**Figure 4** Student enjoyment of social studies class

**Figure 5** Student opinion of difficulty level of work in social studies class.

The focus group interviews also indicated that students had a positive attitude toward social studies. When students were asked to talk about how they felt about social studies as a
subject, they agreed that it was “interesting.” One student commented that social studies was “interesting because it shows a lot of things about the land… the people… how they hunted and made clothes and also about the toys (A. Mizuno, personal communication, February 28, 2014).” Another student added, “I think it was really interesting to learn about their culture and how they used to speak and do things and made things (A. Mizuno, personal communication, February 28, 2014).” The students also expressed enthusiasm for and interest in learning about other topics in social studies including more about other Native American tribes as well as geography and facts about countries.

In contrast to the self-reported positive attitude toward social studies from both classes, my teacher reflection journal entries describe observations of student behavior that suggest a more pronounced difference in the attitudes of the two groups. The entries describe more negative attitudes from the textbook based learning group. For example, I observed many off-task behaviors when the students were asked to read selections from the textbook either as a whole class, or in small groups. On the second day of instruction, I wrote:

Not everyone was following along with the text… During the class, I noticed that there were distracted and there were off task behaviors, like asking to go the bathroom and to get water and having side conversations with neighbors. Although I had some of that with Group A, this class had noticeably more of these behaviors (Researcher reflection journal, January 28, 2014).

In a subsequent entry, I noted my own frustration that we were only able to get through one and a half pages of the written text. There were expressions of frustration from the students as well. When I guided the students in filling out a graphic organizer with information that we had read in the text, I heard one student ask in a discouraged voice, “Do we have to do this? (Researcher reflection journal, January 30, 2014.)” On another day, a student commented, “I don’t think this is interesting…” (Researcher reflection journal, February 4, 2014.)” Overt expressions of negative
attitudes and more subtle expressions in the form of off-task behaviors, showed that students in the textbook based group were not as engaged with the material in the way that it was presented.

In comparison to the textbook based learning group, the constructivist group demonstrated more engaged behaviors during class. On a day when the students looked at Native American artifacts borrowed from a local museum and worked in groups to make predictions about the purpose of the objects and what the objects were made from, I noted the following:

The students were eager to share their thoughts about the objects and used important content vocabulary like tule grass and animal hide/fur. Guesses about the purposes for some of the objects including the stirring stick, cooking stone and clapping stick gave me the opportunity to talk about how acorn mush was made and about Native American music and song (Researcher reflection journal, February 3, 2014).

This activity asked students to make close observations, work together with peers and then share their observations with the whole class. Interacting with the realia sparked rich and relevant discussions with high participation from all the students.

The constructivist group also showed high engagement during an historical simulation activity that asked the students to play the roles of Spanish padres, soldiers and Native Ohlone people at the time of the missionization of California. The debrief following the activity showed that students were able to think and act the way that the historical characters may have acted. When asked how they felt in their roles, the students answered in the following ways:

The Native American students felt sad, angry and scared when they were being threatened and mistreated. The Spanish soldiers and the padres had mixed emotions. One student felt “good” and “powerful” when he was a padre because he got to tell people what to do. Another student playing a soldier said that he felt badly for the Native American people for how they were being treated (Researcher reflection journal, February 11, 2014).

Student enjoyment of the activity was also evident at the end of the class when students asked if we would be doing the simulation the following day.
In summary, although students from both the constructivist and textbook based learning groups reported positive attitudes toward social studies in the surveys, my observations and reflections showed that the constructivist group demonstrated more positive attitudes during class. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude if there indeed was a difference in affective attitudes toward social studies between the two groups.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the three main findings from this research that compared constructivist and didactic teaching practices. The data gave evidence to support the following findings: 1.) Higher academic performance for the constructivist group. 2.) Students in both instructional groups find group work to be the most engaging. 3.) Mixed findings regarding student attitudes toward social studies. In the final chapter, I will discuss the implications of the study and lay out a plan for further research and practice.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This study investigated the effects of two different types of social studies instruction, critical constructivist based teaching and textbook based teaching, on third grade students. The research questions addressed the impact of the contrasting instructional methods in terms of student academic achievement, attitudes toward and engagement with social studies as well as the impact on myself as a the teacher. In this chapter I will briefly summarize the results of the study, contextualize the results in terms of the guiding research questions and the existing literature on the topics as well as provide an action plan for the use of this research project.

The results of the data analysis showed that there was indeed a difference in academic achievement between the two groups of students. Students taught using the critical constructivist method scored fifteen percent higher than those taught solely with the textbook method. However, the data from student attitude surveys, focus group interview and my observations from the teacher reflection journal showed mixed findings in terms of student attitudes and engagement. Although both groups of students reported high engagement and positive attitudes toward social studies in the surveys, the observational data from the classes pointed to more expressions of negative attitudes and off task behaviors from the textbook based learning group.

Discussion of Research Questions

The following research questions guided the investigations in this study:
• What is the impact of constructivist based critical pedagogy teaching for a social studies unit on a third grade class with respect to:
  - end-of-unit test scores?
  - student attitude toward social studies?
  - student engagement?

• What is the impact of constructivist based critical literacy teaching on me as an educator?

In relation to the first research question on the academic impact of constructivist based critical pedagogy teaching, the majority of the existing literature points to a positive correlation between this type of teaching and academic achievement. Kim (2005) found that sixth grade students taught with a constructivist method in mathematics showed higher academic scores than their peers taught using a didactic method. A similar study of ninth graders in Singapore learning English showed that constructivist teaching lead to higher academic achievement (Nie & Lau, 2010.) However, research on a group of sixth graders in rural Illinois found that constructivist teaching did not result in increased scores for the state standardized achievement test (Grady, Wakins & Montalvo, 2012.)

The results of my study with third graders agrees with the existing literature which points to higher academic achievement for students taught using the constructivist method. When the end-of-unit test scores were compared for the constructivist and didactic learning groups, the constructivist group outscored the didactic group by fifteen percent (See Figure 1, Chapter 4). This seems to suggest that implementing constructivist activities such as group discussions, role-plays, art projects and visual input charts allows students to not only retain factual concepts but to use their knowledge to explain historical events and draw meaningful connections.
This study also adds to the existing literature on the academic impact of constructivist teaching because it appears that the specific impact in the subject of social studies has not been studied. It would be interesting if studies such as this one could be replicated in other contexts with elementary teachers teaching social studies. Accumulating evidence on the efficacy of constructivist and critical literacy approaches to social studies could lead to improving the quality of social studies teaching overall.

The first research question also focused on the affective impact of constructivist based instruction, specifically student attitudes and engagement. In the existing literature, which is limited, the majority of researchers found that when compared to didactic teaching, constructivist teaching of social studies lead to increased student attitudes and engagement. Blanken (1999) found that a group of fourth grade students in a Midwestern community were able to improve both their attitudes and engagement with this learning method. A study of an elementary level teacher using problem-based learning for a local history unit in Colorado showed that the instructional methods resulted in the improvement of higher order thinking skills, cooperative and collaborative work and most of all the levels of student engagement and excitement about learning (Wieseman et al. 2005, p14.) In contrast, one study of fifth grade students in Turkey taught using the constructivist method gave evidence for increases academic achievement, but not in student attitudes or engagement (Gultekin et al., 2007.)

This research project yielded conflicting data in terms of the impact of constructivist teaching on student attitudes and engagement. Although both the constructivist learning group and the didactic learning group reported equally positive attitudes toward the subject in their surveys, as the researcher and teacher, I observed a difference in student behaviors and attitudes during class. The students in the constructivist group were more likely to present on-task and
engaged behaviors in class, such as participating in discussions, giving opinions and showing enthusiasm during class activities. In contrast, the didactic group was more likely to demonstrate negative attitudes and disengaged behaviors, such as not asking and answering questions about the text, having unrelated conversations with peers and verbally expressing that the material was difficult and not interesting.

The conflicting evidence on student attitudes and engagement in my study could have been due to the eagerness of the students to please me as the teacher. This may have inflated the self-reporting of their enjoyment of social studies. If this study were to be replicated, having the classes observed by other teachers/researchers who would complete a checklist of negative and positive engaged behaviors could create a more accurate picture of student engagement. Additional areas of exploration could be an investigation of specific constructivist activities that yield high engagement for students and of strategies to support students in reading non-fiction texts.

The final research question addressed the impacts of implementing constructivist strategies on the teacher. An investigation of the literature showed that teachers found both challenges and benefits when reflecting on constructivist teaching in social studies. Weisman et al. (2005) found that researching material for a unit on local history along with creating reading materials that were at the appropriate level were time consuming. Through in depth interviews with elementary school teachers, Yilmaz (2008) also uncovered additional challenges to this type of teaching, including time constraints in relation to instructional time, large class sizes, lack of appropriate training, student discomfort with open-ended activities, and concerns with classroom management.
Studies also pointed to many benefits of constructivist instruction. Teachers’ reflections in one study showed that one of the greatest benefits was student excitement and engagement (Weisman et al. 2005.) A teacher researcher reflecting on her own implementation of a social justice oriented and learner centered unit on Columbus’ arrival in North America, found that students were able to use their social imaginations, develop empathy for those different from themselves, connect the past to their daily lives, and apply the idea of point of view to other historical topics (Zaleski et al. 2013.) Research also demonstrates that the teacher reflection process lead to teachers achieving “an empowered teaching style” and transforming their social studies teaching practices (Christensen et al. 2001.)

By reflecting on my own teaching practices throughout this study I uncovered similar themes concerning the challenges and benefits of implementing constructivist and critical literacy based social studies instruction. My teacher reflection journals revealed my struggles with finding the time to plan open-ended activities, finding appropriate historical reading materials, managing the classroom during role-plays and group work, and differentiating the instruction for students with varying reading and writing abilities. I also wished that my district and site offered more opportunities and support for using hands on approaches to teaching social studies. Currently there are no professional development supports for social studies as a subject. With more training, I could have enhanced my teaching of the unit.

My reflections were also unique in that I used both the didactic and constructivist methods, simultaneously, with two different groups of students. I often had the impulse to bring in the activities that had positive responses and outcomes from the constructivist class into the textbook based class. It was difficult to keep the second class strictly textbook-based when the text was written at a level too high for most of the students to access. It seemed almost unethical
to keep the art projects, role-plays and artifact analysis projects from didactic group. The constraints that I placed on my teaching clearly caused frustration for the students as well as myself. Overall, the process of written reflection after each class allowed me to identify what strategies and activities seemed to be the most effective for the students and attempt to adjust my teaching accordingly, when it was possible. My experiences also solidified my belief that the benefits of constructivist based teaching outweigh the obstacles and challenges.

**Action Plan**

This research project was significant in that it compared constructivist teaching with traditional textbook based methods in a specific content area, elementary social studies, and explored both the academic and affective implications of these methods on the students. The project was also a reflective exercise for me as a teacher, focusing on the process of implementing pedagogy and curriculum that is in line with my core beliefs about teaching and learning. Through completing this project, I enacted a type of teaching that was critical and inquiry based and gained confidence in planning this type of instruction.

This project should be adopted by my school and by the district. At the school, teachers at the third grade level as well as teachers at other grade levels would benefit from this study because it addresses many strategies that can be used to teach social studies in engaging ways. At the district level, the director of Educational and English Learner Services would be able to use the research to develop professional development for elementary teachers on inquiry based social studies teaching.

The project should be shared with district level administrators and trainers who would then be able to create opportunities for professional development and site based discussions.
about the importance of including social studies in the elementary curriculum. I would also like
to share my findings with teachers at my school site to spark discussion of how to incorporate
social studies themes into the school day and what type of teaching strategies would be most
effective in reaching our population of learners. Parents could also be included in a discussion
concerning their thoughts on what type of social studies themes should be taught in the
elementary grades, which may lead them to advocate for more instructional focus on the subject.

I will take the following steps to ensure that my project can be shared with other
educators. First, I plan to share a summary of my findings and key teaching strategies at a school
staff meeting. Second, I will share a synopsis of my research with the director of Educational and
English Learner Service at the district. Lastly, I will give a presentation to groups of parents. I
will know if the action plan needs to be revised by the feedback that I receive after my
presentations and workshops, as well as the discussion that I have with the administrators.

The staff meeting presentation would involve one session, 10 to 15 minutes in length, to
share key strategies that I have learned from implementing constructivist social studies teaching.
The presentation can be scheduled during April or May. If teachers are interested they will be
able to sign up for a one-hour workshop held at a later date with the title, “Strategies for Quality
Social Studies Teaching.” I plan gather resources on social studies teaching including
professional literature on constructivist social studies teaching, teaching guides, children’s
literature, unit kits, websites and lesson plans to share with my colleagues during this workshop.

In order to share my findings with other district level administrators, I will contact the
director of Educational and English Learner Services and schedule a meeting to discuss the
findings from the research as well as resources and lesson plans that were collected and created. I
will also suggest that the school district collect these types of resources in a centralized location and that teachers have access to these materials.

In terms of sharing the project with parents, I will plan a one-hour presentation for families as part of the Family Literacy Night Workshop series. The presentation will include demonstrations of inquiry-based teaching, activities that can be done at home, ideas for local museums and sites to visit and discussions on what type of social studies themes/activities the parents would like to see in their children’s classrooms.

There are some anticipated barriers in sharing this project with others. For example, some administrators and teachers still may not consider social studies teaching to be a high priority as the current climate of high stakes testing has placed such an emphasis on math and language arts. To counter this attitude, it can be argued that with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teachers are now responsible for including more informational texts in the language arts curriculum and for teaching critical analysis, research and presentation skills. Teachers may be able to integrate the social studies content with the teaching of these skills.

Conclusion

The goal of this project was to improve my own social studies teaching as well as improve student knowledge of geography, civics and history. In addition to increasing student knowledge and achievement in the content area, I hoped to improve student engagement, comfort and confidence with the subject matter. Ultimately, I saw the project as an opportunity to bring social studies back into the curriculum for groups of students who, for the most part, had not had access to it.

One area for future research and investigation is the impact that the full adoption of the
Common Core State Standards on the teaching of social studies. There may be the potential for the re-introduction of social studies themes into the elementary curriculum with the emphasis of the standards on informational text. However, to what extent will teachers be encouraged to teach these themes through a constructivist and critical literacy based lenses? Will text based activities be the primary focus, or will there be equal emphasis on inquiry-based projects and activities such as simulations, role-plays and artifact analysis?
Literature Cited


Doolittle, P. E., & Hicks, D. (2003). Constructivism as a theoretical foundation for


