

**Framing Inquiry: A Case Study of Experienced Social Studies Teachers Conducting  
Teacher Research**

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ABSTRACT  
Meghan M. McGlinn  
Framing Inquiry: A Case Study of Experienced Social Studies Teachers Conducting  
Teacher Research  
(Under the Direction of Cheryl Mason Bolick)

This study examined the extent to which fourteen experienced social studies teachers pursued critical inquiry in the teacher research process. The social studies teachers in this study were all former members of the social studies cohort in the Masters of Education (M.Ed.) program at a large research university. During the M.Ed. program the teachers took a course on teacher research in which they conducted their own teacher research projects. Using a case study method, data was collected from documentary evidence [including final teacher research reports, course documents, and other supporting documents] and one-on-one interviews with the teacher researchers and the instructor of the *Teacher as Researcher* course. Postmodernism served as the theoretical framework for presenting the findings of this study. Whereas the literature on teacher research presents two distinct forms of teacher research – practical and critical, the research conducted by members of the social studies cohort spread out along a continuum of critical inquiry. For organizational purposes the fourteen teachers were grouped as: practical teacher research that resulted in little classroom change, practical teacher

research that resulted in classroom change, critical teacher research that resulted in classroom change, and critical teacher research that resulted in classroom and school change. This study describes the multiple and varied iterations of critical inquiry pursued by social studies teachers in the teacher research process. These findings are significant in forming a new theoretical understanding of teacher research and determining ways for social studies teacher educators and policy makers to support the work of teacher researchers.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“What aspect of your teaching are you passionately interested in understanding more deeply?” This question was posed to a group of experienced social studies teachers by their instructor in a graduate course, *Teacher as Researcher I & II*. Each day classroom teachers engage in much less formalized inquiry and decision making. They consider a variety of issues such as student progress, curricular goals, relationships with students, and the building environment as they plan lessons and work with students. Teachers reflect and react continuously; they “think on their feet” and adjust instruction to student needs. The daily decision making comes with experience and learning to adjust teaching strategies to meet student needs. The purpose of this study was to understand whether systematizing teacher inquiry, asking teachers to study something which they are “passionately interested in understanding more deeply,” leads to notable changes. This study focused on the different approaches to answering the core question posed in the *Teacher as Researcher* course and the implications of their teacher research.

Traditionally, three special interest groups influence the curriculum, inquiry, and teaching strategies of teachers – educational researchers, teacher educators, and policy makers. Educational researchers study classroom-based phenomenon and formulate “best practices” for teachers to use to enhance student learning. Teacher educators help

novice teachers develop inquiry and decision-making skills as well as professional knowledge in order to facilitate student learning. Policy makers determine standard curriculum for schools to follow and prescribe a variety of “high-stakes” tests in order to ensure the curriculum standards are met. Each of the three groups wielded “outsider” knowledge to influence classroom outcomes.

Advocates of teacher research propose formalizing teacher inquiry, or the way teachers “think on their feet,” and empowering teachers to use their “insider” knowledge to change classroom practice. They encourage teachers to study their classrooms in a systematic and intentional manner and share their knowledge with the larger educational community. As researchers in their own classrooms, teachers are encouraged not to merely react but, to look proactively at their pedagogical practices and consider long-term characteristics that inform their teaching. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994), “...what distinguishes more productive from less productive teachers may not be mastery of a knowledge base, but rather standing in a different relationship to one's own knowledge, to one's students as knowers, and to knowledge generation in the field” (p. 31). Teacher research transforms the traditional “outside-in” relationship between teachers and the educational community. Brause and Mayher (1991) write about teacher research as “reflection- in- action.” They believe:

...that teaching is so complex it is impossible to ever get it perfect; that teaching practice directly stems from teacher beliefs (implicit or explicit theories); that change in practice depends on change in belief (theory); that the best sources of change in belief (theory) are: reflection-in-action on one's current practice; understanding and transforming research findings and theories so they can form the basis of practice; and sharing problems and reflections with colleagues both locally and nationally (parentheses in original, p. 23).

Teacher researchers take part in the educational discourse rather than sit on the sidelines;

they develop theory and practice simultaneously.

“Teacher research” is often used interchangeably with “action research” or “practitioner research.” I use the term “teacher research” (unless “action research” appears in direct quotations taken from authors) since this term was used by the study participants. In general, “teacher research” is used to describe action research that occurs when teachers investigate their own practice.

This study used the same definition of “teacher research” that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) use: “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (p 7). This basic definition is most appropriate since it aligns with the concept of teacher research as introduced to participants in this study; it appeared in the course text and was iterated explicitly through course materials and instruction. Also the instructor of the course emphasized “systematic and intentional inquiry” through written feedback the students received on the various drafts of their projects and oral discussions in class.

### **Overview of the Literature on Teacher Research**

There are differing proposals regarding type of inquiry that occurs in the teacher research process. On opposite ends of the spectrum are two very different types of teacher research. According to some, through the process of teacher research, teachers study classroom practices. The questions teachers ask and pursue generally relate to discrete pedagogical strategies and issues of practical interest. Others propose that teacher researchers engage in more critical inquiry and, in the process, become activists, teacher leaders, and critical theorists. The questions these teachers ask involve social, cultural, and political issues that affect schooling. The most radical changes proposed

occur through critical teacher research. That is, once teachers study their practice in a more critical way, they begin to take action that confronts what is considered to be “normal” in education.

The literature related to teacher research does not describe a relationship between practical or critical research in the classroom. The descriptions of practical teacher research are highly detailed and well-developed; the same is true for proposals of critical teacher research. Yet these two versions of teacher research sit as if separated by a gulf. Besides critiques offered by proponents of more critical teacher research, there is little dialogue between the two. Missing from the literature is a notion of why teachers engage in critical research and whether teacher researchers who study practical questions could also study critical issues. In other words, can critical inquiry evolve from an interest in practical, educational issues and can practical inquiry result in emancipation and democratization?

The work of social studies, teacher researchers occupies a very small position in the larger field. This is particularly striking given the emphasis within the social studies on inquiry, democracy, and social justice. For instance Stanley (2005) recently asked “Do social studies educators transmit or transform the social order?” According to Johnston (2005), teacher research is well-suited to the social studies, especially because the subject emphasizes inquiry and social justice. She writes that teacher research fulfills the aims of the social studies by “looking at social justice issues in social studies, using inquiry as a mode of professional development, and connecting democratic research processes and social studies aims” (n.p.). Although teacher research is well-suited to the social studies,



my study represents one of only a handful of studies that explore the process related to the concerns of experienced social studies teachers.

### **Study Overview**

In order to explore the connection between practical and critical action research while also considering the potential value of teacher research in the social studies, I present a case study of social studies teachers engaged in classroom research. The purpose of this study includes archiving the social studies teachers' experiences as they "systematically" and "intentionally" studied aspects of their classrooms. It also explores the level of inquiry they pursued and difference in the extent to which the teachers achieved more critically-oriented outcomes through teacher research.

### **Research Question**

In order to understand the differences in the teacher research experiences of the participants I asked the following research question:

Through the teacher research experience, to what extent did social studies teachers pursue critical inquiry into classroom practices?

This study illustrated the multiple and varied iterations and implications of teacher research conducted by the participants.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative case study method framed this study. According to Merriam (1988) qualitative case studies must meet four criteria – they are particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. In fulfilling these criteria I describe the experiences of one

group of social studies teacher researchers. By examining the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry, I explore the different types of questions they asked and the results of their research. My study builds on previous research in the field of social studies teacher education and teacher research.

The teachers that made up this case study were experienced social studies teachers who graduated in August 2005 from the Masters of Education for Experienced Teachers (M.Ed.) program at a large, public university in the Southeastern United States. Data included archival document evidence from their work in a two-semester course, EDUC 193 and 292: *Teacher as Researcher I and II* (three cumulative hours) and, when applicable, other courses in their program of studies. Documentary evidence included the course syllabus, course text and handouts, e-mail messages, researcher notes, written assignments, research group progress reports, final research reports submitted at the end of the course, and audio-taped [final] class presentations. After analysis of the archival evidence was completed, cohort members and the instructor were interviewed one-on-one to better understand their perspectives regarding what happened when these social studies teachers pursued research in their classrooms.

### **Theoretical Framework: Postmodernism**

Brown and Jones (2001) write about teacher research from a postmodern perspective, “Presently practitioners have a tendency to expect the research to tell them ‘how it is’ so that they can plan new strategies for the creation of new outcomes. It is this very attempt at a singular dominant account that we wish to question” (p. 169). In this study I seek not one “singular dominant account,” describing the experience of social

studies teachers engaged in classroom research but multiple, contextually-oriented accounts. Postmodernism serves as the overarching theoretical context for my study. Not only is it most appropriately in line with the philosophical notions under-girding the qualitative, case-study method I chose for my project, but, it legitimizes the value of teacher research within the educational discourse and provides a heuristic for the analysis of the teacher research projects that were the subject of this study.

Similar to Houser (2005), I refer to postmodernism as “an interdisciplinary intellectual movement that tends to reject the universal, structural, mechanical, and hierarchical in favor of an emphasis on difference, multiplicity, and the context-specific nature of experience” (p. 54). Postmodernism rejects meta-narratives – or grand theory – in favor of context specificism and heterogeneity (Schwandt, 2001) and questions modernist beliefs – such as the existence of “universal truth.” Again, according to Houser (2005):

Postmodernist critics reject prevailing assumptions regarding the existence of universal and foundational truths, belief in structural permanence and unilateral determinacy, the notion of a rational, autonomous subject with an essentially ‘human’ character separating mankind from the rest of the world, and the idea that it is possible to know *anything* with certainty, including the nature of one’s own identity (p. 55).

Rather than embrace a positivist paradigm, postmodernists examine the subjective nature of human experience. They are more concerned with understanding the reality people construct.

Postmodernism’s critique of “totalizing discourses” (e.g. Lyotard, 1984) validates the “insider” knowledge of teachers and calls into question “one-size-fits-all” conceptions of educational practices. Postmodernists argue that, "There can be no single, privileged way of knowing" (Hollingsworth, 1994, p.9). In making their argument, they point to the

negative impact of “totalizing discourses” in educational research where privileging a single “way of knowing” led to the “theory/practice gap.” Both educational researchers and practitioners feel the other is unresponsive or ill-informed about the realities of classroom life.

Postmodernism argues against the “objective” or structuralist study of educational phenomenon, in favor of new notions of research. Kincheloe (1995) writes that postmodernism calls for a “redefinition” of research, “Based on a democratic dialogue, an awareness of historical moment, and a passionate commitment to the voice of the oppressed, the postmodern insurrection redefines research, in the process producing a knowledge between the cracks, information previously swept under the rug” (p. 75). Teacher research with its emphasis on the contextual realities of classroom teaching and learning, meets the postmodern criteria of producing “knowledge between the cracks.”

Postmodernist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan were interested in using discourse analysis to understand social and cultural constructions of reality. Michel Foucault (e.g. 1972) shifted this analysis to include the non-discursive aspects of social and cultural life. According to Brown and Jones (2001):

An important thrust of this work is that the categories implicit in the use of language itself reveal much about the community which generated it and the perspective of the individual user. In describing the world I say a lot about myself and the way in which I see my actions gearing into the world. Similarly, there are cultural conventions in describing the world, which reveal the culture's understanding of the world and hence something about the culture itself (p. 19).

In a related vein, this research study views the written and spoken words of the teacher researchers as well as their implicit understandings of teacher research to determine the extent to which these teachers engaged in critical inquiry.

Through teacher research the traditionally *researched* teacher becomes the *researcher*. At the very core of teacher research is a value placed on the individual experiences of teachers rather than blind faith in broad theory or generally believed “best practices.” Teacher research seeks to illuminate the private and public lives of teachers, while creating a community of conversation between teachers and teacher educators. It legitimizes teacher knowledge as “insider” knowledge, valuable for greater understanding of teaching and student learning. At the same time, it serves to break down the historical gap between research conducted at institutions of higher education and the day-to-day practices of teachers in social studies classrooms.

The teacher research cycle viewed from a postmodernist framework provides teachers with the necessary technology to critique dominating discourses and seek alternatives. Brown and Jones (2001) explain that in teacher research, “We [teachers] seek for ourselves and the students we work with both 'empowerment' and 'emancipation.' We want to learn to 'think critically' so that we are able then to recognize the ways in which dominant ideologies and social structures work at coercing and oppressing. (p. 18). Through teacher research, teachers, and, by extension, their students, find the opportunity to uncover and circumvent the “coercive” and “oppressive” structures that exist in classrooms, schools, and society. It is from this postmodernist perspective that teacher research carries the most radical potential for change. According to Kincheloe (1995), teacher research makes possible “complex reconceptualizations of knowledge (p. 73) and this knowledge is “kinetic knowledge- that is, knowledge with the potential to wreak havoc” (p. 76).

Since “kintetic knowledge” develops within teacher research through the process of questioning and challenging dominant ideologies, byexamining the extent to which the fourteen experienced social studies teachers in this study pursued critical inquiry I will similarly point to the “kinetic knowledge” they developed in the process. By using a postmodernist framework to study the teacher research I intend to shed light on the multiple, varied, and context-specific teacher research projects they created. In so doing I will examine whether teacher research does fulfill the postmodernist aim of challenging the dominant discourse and, in the process, lead to empowerment and emancipation for teacher researchers and their students.

### **Description of Chapters**

This chapter introduces the concept of teacher research and the context of this study including the postmodernist theoretical framework. In the next chapter, I offer a review of the literature on teacher research. This review provides a historical background and an overview of current literature. It also demonstrates the need for further research. In chapter three I describe my research methods including the use of a qualitative case study method and the process for collecting and analyzing documentary and interview data. Chapter four presents the findings of this study. The teacher research projects created by the members of the social studies cohort are grouped in order to describe the differences between the projects and the extent to which the teachers pursued critical inquiry. The final chapter provides a summary of the findings and a discussion of the implications of these findings for educational stakeholders – educational

researchers, teacher educators, and policy makers. This chapter also makes suggestions for future research.

## **Conclusion**

A description of how the teachers in this study answered the question posed to them, concerning their individual research interests, is valuable to the work of the various stakeholders, educational researchers, teacher educators, and policy makers. It reveals the teachers' concerns, interests, and experiences related to teacher research in the social studies classroom; this, in turn, leads to a better understanding of reasons why the projects – their aims, methods, and outcomes – differed among cohort members. Research already indicates the variety of potential benefits of teacher research for improving teaching and learning, improving the educational research community's understanding of schooling, and enhancing teacher education. My study answers the call of Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994) to contribute to a research agenda that examines, "the relationships among teacher inquiry, professional knowledge, and practice" (p. 23).

Teacher research provides a valuable means to understand classroom practices, to determine those practices that best facilitate teaching and learning, and to, ultimately, change the culture of schooling. The "insider" knowledge produced provides potentially powerful insights into educational research. While there is a large body of scholarship related to teacher research, there is little discussion of the processes that contribute to practical and critical versions of teacher research. At the same time, teacher research appears rarely in the social studies literature. This study will fill in the blanks by

uncovering the experiences of social studies teacher researchers and determining the factors that contribute to more critical inquiry.



## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

When the members of the social studies cohort took the *Teacher as Researcher* course, I became intrigued with their projects. They were “on to something that matters” (Zeichner, 1994, p.74). The teachers expressed excitement about their projects, they tried new teaching practices and approaches, and eagerly shared their results. The varied and significant results of their projects, made me want to explore their experience further. Prior to collecting documentary and interview data, I reviewed literature related to teacher research. This contributed to my research design; in particular my focus on teacher research in the social studies and the use of critical inquiry.

Boote and Beile (2005) write that a review of literature establishes the context for a study by providing historical background and an overview of current literature, while also demonstrating a need for further research. In this chapter I provide a contextual background for my study by defining characteristics, history, and work already done in the field of teacher research. I follow the trajectory of teacher research not only in the United States but in the United Kingdom and Australia since educators there particularly influenced the growth of critical teacher research. I also review current research studies and give an overview of purported benefits of teacher research. More specifically, I demonstrate a lack of studies on teacher research in the field of social studies. Through

this review of literature, I establish the context of my study while also justifying its importance in contributing to literature on teacher research specific to the social studies. I will return to this review of the literature in the final chapter in order to describe the implications of my study relevant to the larger educational discourse on teacher research.

Due in part to postmodernist beliefs and to a growing interest in qualitative methods, teacher research holds a more prominent position within the American educational research community than in previous times (Lagemann, 2000). Increasingly, teacher researchers present their work at national conferences, including the American Educational Research Association (AERA), and share their findings in educational journals and texts. An upcoming edition of *Teacher Educational Quarterly*(2006) will be entirely devoted to teacher research. Teacher conducted, classroom-based inquiry has not always enjoyed such a prominent place in American educational research; its history has been marked by a series of setbacks and it is not until recently that teacher research experienced a revival in the U.S. According to Lagemann (2000) "During the 1980s, owing to the expanding conceptions of research associated with qualitative studies, teacher research gained new standing" (p. 223). More specifically, Lagemann traces this revival to the work of teacher educators, in particular Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle. Lagemann writes, " Even though some educationists remained skeptical, this work convinced others that, beyond its value to teachers so engaged, teacher research could help elaborate the knowledge base of teaching" (p 224).

In this literature review, I highlight findings from the literature that suggest the varied potentials of teacher research to change not only educational research but also classroom practices and teacher professional development. In addition I will describe the

teacher research process, the role of the teacher, and the history of this form of educational research in order to clarify the philosophical and theoretical origins of teacher research.

### **Teacher Research Process**

Teacher research is “systematic and intentional” classroom inquiry; the process involves a series of cyclical steps rooted in ethnographic traditions. Teacher researchers conduct inquiry by collecting data within the classroom through qualitative (e.g. observations, interviews, document analysis) and quantitative means (e.g. surveys, questionnaires, comparison of test data). Throughout the process of data collection, the teacher analyzes the information gained, draws conclusions, and, makes plans for change. This cycle continues as teachers implement changes and study the outcomes. Glesne (1999) writes:

During the reflection phase, the data are interpreted and the multiple viewpoints are communicated and discussed among those with a stake (the stakeholders) in the process. This is followed by the action phase which involves planning, implementation, and evaluation" (p. 13).

Throughout the process, the ultimate goal, then, revolves around action – mainly involving teachers changing and improving some aspect of their practice. Johnston (2005) writes, “The distinguishing characteristic of action research, however, is its focus on *action*. Taking action and studying its consequences for student learning is the hallmark of action research. The action is intended to create change for the better and the study is intended to find out if it does” (n.p.). Essential to teacher research, the action step promotes classroom change; change is not initiated without careful examination and planning.

## **Role of the Teacher**

Through the process of teacher research, the traditional role of the teacher relative to the educational community evolves. According to Mohr et al. (2004), teacher research involves more than just conducting research within the classroom, it becomes a habit of mind; "We define teacher research as inquiry that is intentional, systematic, public, voluntary, ethical, and contextual"(p. 23). The emphasis on sharing research findings with the public signifies a fundamental change in the role of the teacher relative to the educational community. No longer a technician within the classroom the teacher researcher is a "decision maker, consultant, curriculum developer, analyst, activist, school leader" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 17).

Perhaps most significant, teachers' theories become evident as teachers complete research projects - essentially breaking down the theory-practice gap. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994), "If we regard teachers' theories as sets of interrelated conceptual frameworks grounded in practice, then teacher researchers are revealed as both users and generators of theory" (p. 28). So, in the process of studying teaching and learning, teachers find theory useful in understanding their practice and suggesting change. This process leads to teachers clarifying and developing their own working theories which inform their revised practices.

Teacher research, by affirming teachers as professionals within the classroom context, allows new space for teachers to explore. Instead of simply implementing outsider knowledge, teachers now engage in decision making and curriculum theorizing. They become responsible (and responsive) to both theory *and* practice. This represents

the movement of teachers into a space traditionally reserved for outside educational researchers.

### **Teacher Research and the Social Studies**

Unfortunately there has been little research conducted on teacher research projects in the field of social studies. According to Johnston (2005):

Action research and self-study have had little currency in social studies education. They have been important in other areas of educational research but are relatively underused in ours. Yet they have at least as much to offer the social studies as they do to other areas, because they are oriented to the improvement of teacher practice. In addition, these research approaches naturally raise questions about social structures and justice issues, which are important for social studies (n.p.).

Johnston goes on to describe action research as a lamp, “It looks outward. It shines light on some aspect of teaching practice and helps us to see more clearly and carefully in order to promote change” (n.p.).

While there are no studies on teacher research in social studies educational research, there are a few examples of classroom inquiry conducted by teacher educators. In one such study, Hyland and Noffke (2005) write about their long-term action research project in which they studied their teaching of a social studies methods course for pre-service teachers. Interested in determining the extent to which the social justice aims of the methods course impacted their students, Hyland and Noffke research “how to better prepare teacher education students to successfully teach students from historically marginalized groups” (p. 367). In order to conduct their inquiry they examine student work, take notes during class conversations, and hold focus group interviews. Based on

this investigation, Hyland and Noffke reflect on ways to improve their assignments and the path to take for future action research.

Another group of social studies teacher educators, Barton et al. (2004), compare the development of inquiry among pre-service social studies teachers in Ireland and the United States. Mainly interested in encouraging “structured inquiry” among the future teachers their methods classroom-based research examines student work and interview responses. The study found merit in overtly encouraging teachers to engage in reflective inquiry in the classroom.

The studies written from the perspectives of social studies teachers and practitioners fall more closely in line with the literature on “self-study” rather than teacher research since the authors do not specifically use the teacher research cycle (posing questions, collecting data, and drawing conclusions). Wilson (1990) conducted a study of her students’ content knowledge while she taught in a third grade social studies classroom. As a result of her work she argued in favor of pre-service education that emphasizes both content and pedagogical knowledge. Like Wilson, VanSledright (2002) systematically examined his teaching of several units of history in a fifth grade classroom. He was interested in the way in which higher-elementary students learn the subject matter.

As a result of the relative lack of research on teacher research in the social studies, my study relies heavily on the work of educators from other fields, in particular teacher education, literacy, and English education. However, I agree with Johnston (2005) when she writes about the potential for teacher research in the social studies classroom:

There are many ways in which action and self-study research could be useful to us as social studies educators. Whatever issues and challenges we

have as teachers can be supported by doing research and studying our teaching. Here I look at three areas in which such research can be particularly useful: 1) looking at social justice issues in social studies, b) using inquiry as a mode of professional development, and c) connecting democratic research processes and social studies aims. (n.p.)

It is surprising given the analytical characteristics that define the social studies that teacher research does not enjoy a more prominent position. In a field dedicated to social justice, critical inquiry, and democracy, teacher research is strikingly absent.

### **Value of Teacher Research**

The value of teacher research lies in the potential result of the process – change (Brause & Mayher, 1999). The form and extent of the desired change, however, differs. While the same basic premises hold true – teacher research is systematic, intentional inquiry, conducted by teachers – the goals and aims differ. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2005):

Some action researchers emphasize the value of action research in the professional development of educators in school settings...Other approaches to action research focus on encouraging practitioners to undertake investigations to help build the knowledge base for their own practice and for other practitioners, or in the service of school reform. Still other approaches emphasize the use of action research to promote democratic forms of education and collaboration among teachers, students, and others in the educational community (p. 489).

As Gall et al. suggest, at one end of the spectrum is practical teacher research related to classroom practices. Generally in this case teacher research is viewed as “practically useful;” the work generally confirms teacher practices and “craft knowledge” while encouraging teachers to engage in dialogue with university-based researchers. On the opposite end of the spectrum resides “critically emancipatory” teacher research which involves critical inquiry of social and political contexts of schooling and is heavily

influenced by a desire to promote more democratic schooling. This version most often appears in literature on action research coming out of the United Kingdom and Australia. The incorporation of critical theory with classroom-based research implies the teacher researcher takes a more overtly critical stance, in the process challenging commonly held notions about education and pushing toward emancipatory change. Teacher researchers are viewed as change agents both within the classroom and within the larger education community. Demonstrative of this view, Brause & Mayher (1999) write:

There are two complimentary purposes for conducting educational research: *to enhance the quality of life*, making our practices more democratic, more equitable, and more humane; and *to enlarge our understandings*, moving our practice from intuition, lore, and beliefs to more principled decision-making... (p. 47-8).

The potential of teacher research to affirm teachers' roles within the educational discourse translates not only into "more principled decision-making" and better pedagogy but also into better schools and classrooms. Students become the beneficiaries of the work of involved, critical, and motivated teacher researchers.

Below I provide an overview of the history of teacher research which illustrates its development in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. Then, I explore several of the perceived potential benefits of classroom-based research as described in the literature. These benefits relate to the aims of teacher research and, in turn, reflect an interest in a varying degree of critical inquiry in the classroom context.

### **The History of Teacher Research**

A variety of histories of teacher research have been published (e.g. Carr & Kemmis, 1986; McKernan, 1991; Noffke, 1997) and these accounts often differ regarding the genesis of the movement. Noffke (1997), for example, views John Collier, leader of



the Commission of Indian Affairs (1933-1945), as a possible starting point of action research. Others trace its development alongside other changes in social sciences, such as the increasing use of ethnographic methods and growing legitimacy of the social sciences (e.g. McKernan, 1991). Some credit John Dewey's emphasis on teacher inquiry and Hilda Taba's (1950s) inter-group education project with influencing the growth of interest in teacher inquiry, especially in the post-war era (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

Almost all of the accounts agree that industrialist Kurt Lewin's work in the 1940s related to "how participation in decision making could lead to enhanced productivity" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 40) did the most to encourage the growth of action research inquiry. While his original model applied to factories, its core premises appeared relevant to educators. According to Glesne (1999), "Action research grew out of the work of Kurt Lewin (1890-1947). His model of action research was grounded in the positivist paradigm with clear separation between the researcher and the researched and with cycles of discovery, intervention, and evaluation" (p. 13). While teacher research has evolved its positivist origins, Lewin's effort to "find ways to involve social actors with research through group decision making and elaborate problem solving procedures" (Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994, p. 3) later helped to define the teacher research process.

Significantly, many point to Stephen Corey's work at the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute at Teacher's College with influencing the introduction of action research into education. His *Action Research to Improve School Practices* (1953) drew on the work of John Dewey which he with the socio-psychological field theory of Kurt Lewin (1948). However, the extent of Corey's influence has been downplayed since his studies were too technical and tended to "leave behind the reflectiveness of teachers as a legitimate form

of action research” (Schubert & Lopez-Schubert, 1997, p. 214).

In the late 1950s, the initial excitement over teacher research in the United States ebbed. This, according to Lampert (2000), differed sharply from the situation in Japan, China, and the United Kingdom where "a strong tradition of 'action research' by teachers began in the 1960s and continues today" (p. 65). Perhaps to blame for the loss of interest in the U.S. was the centrally funded, large-scale research known as the "Development and Diffusion Model" that gained favor in the 1960s during the Cold War and the Sputnik-induced race with the Soviet Union (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). According to McTaggart (1997) action research in the U.S. was effectively "pushed aside by a dominant positivist research ideology;" he writes, "In the U.S., the culture that spawned McCarthyism may have obliterated the broad left hegemony necessary to hold out the colonization of social inquiry by the natural scientific method" (p. 11). The tide change in educational research effectively blunted the growth of teacher research.

This trend belied an internal struggle going on in the later sixties that would lead to a new interest in teacher research as the 1970s and 1980s progressed. McNiff and Whitehead (2002) write, "an increasingly inward turning mood due to political and social tensions of the time" (p. 43) such as McCarthyism, the Civil Rights Movement, war protest, and disenchantment with technical control all led to an eventual shift to self-critical inquiry. This along with neo-positivist social science in the post-Sputnik age, the significance of ethnographic work in education research (e.g. Eisner, 1985; Willis, 1978), the appearance of autobiographic research, and interest in self-analysis and emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 1972) all paved the way for an eventual resurgence of teacher research in American education.

## **Teacher-as- Researcher Movement in the United Kingdom**

Much of this resurgence drew on the work of Lawrence Stenhouse and his colleagues at the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) in the United Kingdom. According to Goodson (1999), under Stenhouse's leadership CARE began to push for acknowledgment of the "educational researcher's social and political purpose" (p. 279). Stemming from the Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP)(originally based at the University of East Anglia) which began in 1967, it "drew deeply on the egalitarian commitments of sections of post-war British society" (p. 279). From the beginning, CARE emphasized emancipatory strategies and more critical outcomes of practitioner research.

Stenhouse nurtured this emphasis on critical inquiry during his tenure as CARE's leader. Especially when the conservative financial and economic events of 1976 ushered in the federal "New Right Programme" (which marked the end of many social welfare projects in post-war Britain), Stenhouse encouraged educators to push for change beginning in schools. Goodson (1999) writes, "During the 1970s, besides conducting a wide range of curriculum development and evaluation projects, CARE became a centre for defining educational research modalities in the public sphere" and its major task became finding "intellectual answers to the problems of empowering education for all" (p. 283-284). According to McNiff and Whitehead (2002), "He [Stenhouse] saw teaching and research as closely related, and called for teachers to reflect critically and systematically about their practice as a form of curriculum theorizing" (p. 43). Perhaps the most obvious indication of the link between Stenhouse's work and the development of teacher research appears in his own writing; in 1975 he wrote that goal of CARE was

to instill, "The commitment to systematic questioning of one's own teaching as a basis for development; the commitment to and the skills to study one's own teaching; the concern to question and to test theory in practice by the use of those skills" (Stenhouse, 1975 cited in McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 144).

Stenhouse's ideas were extended by John Elliot and Clem Adelman with the Ford Teaching Project, 1973-76 (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Elliot, in particular, who became the coordinator of CARE in 1991, continued the tradition established by Stenhouse of moving beyond objective curriculum research to a focus on the process of teacher inquiry. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2002), his revised version of Lewin's model insisted that rather than consistently pursue a single aim in practitioner research, the "general idea should be allowed to shift" (p. 46) as the study progressed. Also, Elliot emphasized a continual cycle of research and action, of planning and implementation. He cautioned against too quickly judging a teaching strategy's value without first clarifying the extent to which it was implemented; he feared teachers might dismiss an action or innovation as unsatisfactory due merely to their inability to actually implement the strategy. Importantly, Elliot and Adelman were joined in their work by Australia educators who transported the concept home and transformed "teacher as researcher" to "participatory action research."

### **Critical-Emancipatory Action Research in Australia**

Stenhouse's influence appears in the work of teacher educators in Australia. Stephen Kemmis, like Stenhouse, based many of his ideas on Lewin's original conceptualization of action research. He wanted to help teachers understand the social

and political construction of educational practices and described classroom-based inquiry as “educational action research.” Kemmis’ model of teacher research portrayed a spiral process involving devising a question, planning, implementing, observing, reflecting, and re-planning. Together with Wilf Carr, Kemmis (1986) wrote:

Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants (teachers, students or principals, for example) in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of a) their own social or educational practices, b) their understanding of these practices, and c) the situations (and institutions) in which their practices are carried out (p. 162).

Carr and Kemmis applied Jürgen Habermas’ (1972) early work in conceptualizing critical teacher research. Namely, Habermas identified three “knowledge constitutive interests”: “technical control,” “practical knowledge” and “emancipatory interest” (Habermas, 1972 cited in Brown & Jones, 2001, p.33-34) that operate in making sense of one’s task. Carr and Kemmis adopted this framework as a way of viewing the levels at which a teacher can intervene in his or her practice through teacher research. They viewed the emancipatory interest as a fundamental principle of teacher research. They encouraged teachers to critically interrogate their understanding of practice with a view to developing this practice, moving to new ways of understanding, and working toward democracy.

Robin McTaggart of Deakin University was a colleague of Kemmis and collaborated on *The Action Research Planner* (1988) which became a well-known text for practitioners and university-based educators around the world. McTaggart also wrote extensively about his cross-cultural work with Aboriginal people in his text, *Action Research: A Short Modern History* (1991). His history of action research contributed to the articulation of a theoretical framework of participatory action research. He repeatedly emphasized the emancipatory possibilities of this form of teacher research and was

severely critical of what he considered to be more benign forms of teacher research.

McTaggart (1997) feared that the action research cycle would lose its radical potential and develop “iconic simplicity” (p. 17).

Combined, the work of these Australia educators and others interested in action research extended the original work of Lewin as well as that of British advocates of teacher research. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999):

Although varying somewhat, the visions of educational research embedded in these writings shared a grounding in critical and democratic social theory and in explicit rejection of the authority of professional experts who produced and accumulated knowledge in 'scientific' research settings for use by others in practical settings (p. 16).

Grounded in critical social theory, teacher research abroad emphasized the liberatory function of classroom-based inquiry as a means to greater democracy in schooling.

### **Modern Teacher Research Movement in the United States**

While teacher research gained momentum in the United Kingdom and Australia, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that American educators grew interested in classroom-based inquiry. According to Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) this was partly due to a "paradigm shift in researching, teaching, and assessing writing that evolved during the 1970s and 1980s" (p.6). Influential texts such as Schon's *Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983) and Ann Berthoff's (1987) phrase "The teacher as RE-searcher" marked a new interest in teacher inquiry. The appearance of "teacher as researcher" or "action research" in the US did not follow closely along the same lines of its British or Australian counterparts. The growth of teacher research in the United States for the most part contributed to the development of

more practically oriented versions of classroom-based inquiry. Teacher research influenced teacher education and professional development.

By 1999 Cochran-Smith and Lytle contended that five major trends in teacher research had occurred in the United States since the mid 1980s: 1. growth in the prominence of teacher research in teacher education; 2. development of conceptual frameworks and theories of teacher research; 3. dissemination of teacher research findings in journals and conference proceedings; 4. critique of teacher research; and the 5. belief in the transformative potential of teacher research in education. Below I explore work already done related to teacher research. In particular I outline the various categories of potentially transformative benefits of teacher research as described in the literature.

### **Benefits of Teacher Research**

Eventually, as school and university-based educators became interested in teacher research, educational theory proved useful as a means to understand the phenomenon. This theoretical work along with newly published histories of teacher research led to the exploration of potentially positive outcomes of teacher research. While there are research studies related to teacher research, the majority of related literature includes manuals for practitioners or hypothetical pieces about teacher research's "potential outcomes." Below I divide my exploration into seven potential benefits of teacher research that appear in the literature on teacher research. The potential benefits cited by proponents of teacher research include: alleviate the gap between theory and practice; enhance teacher education; improve teacher professional development; improve student learning; affirm

and empower teachers; reform schools; and change society. Whenever possible, I provide an overview of a relevant research study.

### **Alleviate the Gap between Theory and Practice**

According to Zeichner (1994), teacher research is a “reaction against a view of teachers as technicians who merely carry out what others outside of the classroom want them to do” (p. 70). Teacher research alleviates the “gap” between university-based educational theory and classroom practice. It subverts the traditional assumption of knowledge about teaching as “outside-in” – university based researchers report on “best practices” that teachers are then expected to implement in the classroom. Brause and Mayher (1999) write:

Historically classroom educators were expected to read and use the research which educational researchers conducted through large-scale testing programs in isolated laboratory settings. Predictably classroom teachers found little in the decontextualized, laboratory-based research to inform practice with specific students. Therefore it carried little, if any weight in our professional decision making (p. 45).

By definition teacher research provides an alternative to decontextualized, university-based research since it occurs within classrooms in authentic settings. At the same time teacher research may be more relevant to teachers since it originates in “real” classrooms. Some argue that the gap is exacerbated by the very different concerns of educational researchers versus those of teachers. For example, Lagemann (1988) writes:

Education research is conceived and planned today largely by researchers outside of the day-to-day concerns of educators. In its questions, methodologies, and reporting styles, such research tends to be driven by the professional standards of scholarly inquiry of the societies and journals of its constituent fields (p.14).

Educational research that originates outside of the concerns of teachers bears little



relevance to their daily needs. Teacher research on the other hand directly connects to classroom teaching and learning since it originates in the work of practitioners.

Beyond being more relevant, teacher research also legitimates the pedagogical knowledge of practitioners. The privileging of university knowledge over that gained through classroom experience results in the exclusion of teachers from decision making. Rather, teachers in this model, merely act as technicians implementing knowledge gained at the university. Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994) write, “The implication that the knowledge that makes teaching a profession comes from authorities outside the profession itself and that what makes teachers professional is using this knowledge base in their daily practice is exclusionary and disenfranchising” (p. 142). Beyond serving to disenfranchise and silence teachers, overemphasis on traditional university-based educational research also impedes teacher development and student learning.

Hollingsworth and Sockett (1994) write:

Scientific conclusions are discovered by university researchers, tested in the Herculitan fire of the refereed journal, and handed down to the efficient classroom technicians. This view of improvement creates and feeds teacher-practitioners who are 'hungry for technique;' in so doing, it may actively hinder their engagement in understanding and challenging what is being offered rather than merely imitating it in their classroom (p. 1-2).

The voices of teachers are missing in traditional educational research and as such, not only is situationally-gained knowledge lost, but there are few incentives for teachers to take part in forming notions of “best practices” and testing their applicability.

Within the teacher research literature, many agree with Goodson (1999), however, that the traditional relationship between university-based educators and the coinciding theory-practice gap is not unavoidable. He writes, “The crucial point to grasp, however,

is that the lack of communication and ongoing displacement between theory and practice is not an intrinsic, but rather a socially structured problem. New structures of collaboration and forms of knowledge might rapidly ease the current problems” (p. 286). Teacher research provides the “new structures” and "teacher research has particular potential for transforming the university-generated knowledge base" (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994, p. 33) by bringing teachers into “the conversation about the purposes and the uses of education research” (Lagemann, 1998, p. 14).

Primarily the value of teacher research purported by its advocates lies in its responsiveness to contextual demands of teaching and its ability to “explode” the theory-practice gap. Teacher research emerges from problems of practice and:

... calls attention to teachers as knowers and to the complex and distinctly nonlinear relationships of knowledge and teaching as they are embedded in local contexts and in the relations of power that structure the daily work of teachers and learners in both schools and the university (Lytle, & Cochran-Smith, 1994, p. 23).

Teacher research, according to this view, effectively challenges the “hegemony of an exclusively university-generated knowledge base for teaching” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16) by blurring the boundaries of research and practice. No longer is educational research unresponsive to teachers’ experiences and underused in the classroom – it has direct relevance. Teachers are no longer “subjects” but active participants and the research benefits them directly. By completing the teacher research process - synthesizing research and theory, constructing questions, planning action research, and collecting and analyzing data – the teacher makes thoughtful conclusions about best practices.

According to Lampert (2000), "The question of who in the research community

speaks appropriately of teaching and how they should go about studying practice has been raised repeatedly over the last decade" (p. 61-62). Teacher research values the voice of teachers and increasingly educational researchers are seeking out ways to collaborate with teacher researchers. There appears to be a renewed sense of the value of encouraging situated educational research. Alan and Miller (1990) write:

Action research, which in its very design can have an impact on the learning in classrooms during its course rather than having to wait until research results are translated into practical classroom models, can be fostered by teachers and researchers working together in a reciprocal relationship (p. 197).

Obviously this bridges the university-school gap and alters the position of teachers from technicians to more equal stakeholders in educational research – teacher researchers join in the discourse. In both journals and conferences dedicated to teacher research and others dedicated to teaching and learning, teachers find the opportunity to share their research. Significantly, the national conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) includes special interest groups (SIG) dedicated to “Action Research” and “Teacher Research.” At the 2005 conference action research appeared as a subject in 59 sessions and teacher research in 90 sessions.

### **Enhance Teacher Education**

Teacher educators explore the potential of classroom-based inquiry to improve pre-service education and are interested in breaking down the theory-practice gap. Within the traditional paradigm, university teacher educators’ “outside knowledge” proved rarely relevant in the development of pre-service teachers’ “insider knowledge.” As a result many new teachers regarded their pre-service training as ineffective. Increasingly, however, teacher education programs seek to not only more practically

oriented their pre-service, teacher education programs but, also push their student-teachers to view themselves as “change agents.” Unsatisfied with merely helping new teachers fit into the status quo, teacher educators are using classroom-based inquiry to encourage student-teachers to reflect more critically on teaching and learning

Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994) write extensively about one such program at the University of Pennsylvania – Student Teachers as Researching Teachers (START). Through their work with this program they discovered that the pre-service teachers involved developed more inquiry-oriented stances towards teaching and, by using a more critical lens, broke out of the traditional apprenticeship model of teacher preparation. Also, as these student-teachers began to develop their own practical theories of teaching and learning, they were more successful in the classroom.

Levin and Rock (2003) describe the experiences of five pairs of pre-service and mentor teachers who engaged in collaborative action research. In particular they examine the “views of both novice and experienced teachers regarding the costs and benefits of doing collaborative action research” (137). Levin and Rock base their conclusions on a variety of data including pre- and post-interviews of each pair, individual interviews, and audiotapes of planning, mid-semester, and final evaluation meetings of each pair along with written action research plans and reflections by the pre-service teachers. Through “in vivo” coding and triangulation of data, they provide a cross-case report. As a result they conclude, “These five case studies echo many of the finding of Friessson (1994) and Catelli (1995), thus reinforcing their claim that engagement in collaborative action research has the potential to build collaborative pedagogical relationships in internships settings” (p. 145). They caution, however, that in order for collaborative action research

to be most successful both mentor teachers and student teachers need adequate support, time, and encouragement.

There is evidence that teacher research enhances teacher education. By engaging in the process of classroom inquiry, novice teachers begin to build a pedagogical knowledge base as well as the skills necessary to effectively implement instruction. They learn to inquire into their practices by talking to students and attempting a variety of interventions. Especially in cases where collaborative teacher research occurs, the novice teacher develops a professional relationship with experienced teachers.

### **Improve Teacher Professional Development**

Similar to the gains observed for novice teachers, teacher research also appears to facilitate the professional development of experienced teachers. The literature on teacher research envisions a never-ending cycle of professional growth that does not end with student teaching. Connected to the empowerment teachers often experience as a result of teacher research is the potential to improve professional development by engaging teachers in meaningful professional development relevant to their contexts. This differs sharply from the one-size-fits-all, fragmented professional development model traditionally employed by school systems. The opportunity to engage in the exploration of personal interests is motivating and energizing to teachers; according to Zeichner, for instance, "When teachers have the experience of action research the overwhelming majority come to the conclusion that they are on to something that matters" (1994, p. 74). Teacher researchers become "hooked" and often continue to research after their initial

experience. Some go on to expand their studies and share their ideas with colleagues (MacLean & Mohr, 1999; Mohr et al., 2004).

Importantly teacher research sheds light on “craft knowledge” or the practical theory that teachers rely on in their day to day practices. Systematic and intentional inquiry in the classroom, fundamental to the teacher research process, leads to improved understanding of what is already “known” (either from experience, pre-service or in-service training) and whatever was previously unexamined. Lytle and Cochran Smith (1994) write, "We have argued that teacher research is a way for teachers to come to know their own knowledge" (p. 30).

By providing teacher researchers the opportunity to build collegial relationships and to develop competency in understanding educational research and implement it in the classroom, teacher researchers develop professionally. Alan and Miller (1990) use a “collaborative and constructivist” model to promote teacher research and conclude, "The teachers we worked with became professionals because they were given the tools, support, and opportunity to document and demonstrate their expertise within their own classrooms, within their school communities, and finally within their professional community" (p. 201). In their study teacher research provides a powerful learning tool for teachers to become “professionals.” This experience differs sharply from the infantilizing and scripted professional development the teachers experienced in the past.

According to the literature, teacher researchers develop a sense of professionalism. This is due in part to their ability to articulate “craft knowledge” and demonstrate its viability through classroom based research. At the same time, teacher research opens up new avenues for teachers to enter into professional discourse with the

educational community at large – especially through conference presentations and journal articles. As opposed to one-size-fits-all models of professional development, teacher research allows practitioners to explore issues of particular concern. The cycle of teacher research, systematically and intentionally studying classroom practices, also leads teachers to become more responsive to the needs of their students.

### **Create Student Centeredness**

It is not surprising that teacher researchers experience greater success in the classroom by developing a better awareness of student needs. Falk and Blumenreich (2005), write, "Many teacher we know have changed the way they teach after experiencing themselves as learners in a new way as a result of developing and exploring their questions" (p.177). The process of engaging in classroom inquiry, calling into question theories of practice, collecting and analyzing data, collaborating and discussing findings, and making plans for change is an arduous learning process, especially for teachers already limited by time demands. By positioning themselves in the position of learner, teacher researchers develop empathy towards their student-learners. This fundamentally alters the relationship between the teacher and student.

This empathy also stems from teacher researchers learning about their students' needs as they consult with them in classroom- based inquiry. Whether through the use of one-on-one interviews with students, whole class discussions, or even questionnaires and surveys to collect data, teachers develop a new "mindfulness" (van Manen, 1990) towards their students when they become teacher researchers. According to Brasue and Mayher (1999), "We get to know and understand our students better, making us more

sensitive to their specific needs. We increase our effectiveness as teachers because we are able to design and institute practices which are sensitive to the needs of our individual students" (p. 208). The combination of increased empathy and mindfulness toward the learner leads teachers to change teaching practices by incorporating more student-centered learning activities. Falk and Blumenreich (2005) write:

The first experience in teacher research is often an end to an old way of teaching -- one in which the teacher has all the answers that the new students must digest. Teacher research can be an introduction to a new way -- one that awakens questions, engages interests, provides resources, and facilitates learning (p. 181).

The process of researching and the opportunity to talk to students leads teachers to consider new approaches to teaching that allow for greater student engagement.

Finally, through the course of their research, teachers also invite more student participation. As mentioned above, the methods of collecting data are often highly dependent on student participation. At the same time, teachers who choose to engage in research make themselves vulnerable by acknowledging that they don't have all of the answers and need their students' help in figuring out how best to improve their teaching. This fundamentally alters the relations of power in the classroom. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1994:

Teachers who are actively researching their own practices provide opportunities for their students to become similarly engaged. Researching teachers create classroom environments in which there are researching students -- students ask, not just answer questions; pose, not just solve problems; and help to construct curriculum out of their own linguistic and cultural resources, rather than just receive preselected and predigested information (p. 37).

Not only does teacher research lead to a more student-centered curriculum, but it opens up new possibilities for students and their interests. These new opportunities translate



into more effective and appropriate teaching strategies and a greater empathy on the part of the teacher toward students' needs.

### **Affirm and Empower Teachers**

By helping teachers gain a sense of professionalism and improve their practice teacher research is also affirming for teachers. Rogers et al., (1990) note, "Action research is a vehicle to put teachers in charge of their craft and its improvement" (p. 179). Teacher researchers make the choice of "burning questions" to study and issues to confront. As a result, they often find their personal theories of teaching and learning validated. Falk and Blumenreich write (2005), "Research about a personal burning question has, for many teachers, fostered their self-efficacy and given them a sense of possibility that they never had before" (p. 180). While teachers may have a feeling that their practices work, by systematically and intentionally studying those practices teachers find evidence to support their feelings, or "craft knowledge." According to Falk and Blumenreich, "An unanticipated, but pleasant outcome for teachers who have engaged in research about their own questions has been finding affirmation for ideas and practices that were previously intuitive" (p. 177).

Mohr et al. (2004) provide a descriptive study written from a variety of perspectives – teacher research leaders, facilitators, principals, and county-level administrators -- in *Teacher Research for Better Schools*. Central to the study is the development of the "Teacher Research Network" located in Fairfax County, Virginia from a U.S. Department of Education Grant. The Network is made of 3 "project schools" in one public school district. Within each school, groups of teacher researchers meet,

plan, and publicize their work and they develop cross-school professional networks. As a result of the Network, Mohr et al (2004) report changes at the school, district, and community level. The work of teacher researchers is valued by the administration, parents, and other teachers. Teachers find opportunities for leadership as “Teacher Research Leaders” who organize and support groups of researching teachers. And, teachers take part in policy decisions, such as those who belonged to the “Block Scheduling Committee.” Mohr et al. describe the impact on teachers:

The effect of teachers' research knowledge are first evident in their dialogue with teacher research colleagues and then in the teaching of their colleagues. Teachers' research generates new programs and contributes to thoughtful implementation and ongoing assessment of existing programs. Teacher researchers direct their individual and collective professional development in a school. Teacher researchers develop skills that enhance a school's capacity for data-based decision making and professional collaborations. Teacher researcher leaders, with the support of their principals, can forge meaningful connections between teacher research and school planning (p. 117).

The teachers in the Network are no longer isolated in individual classrooms, rather they develop a sense of their work mattering for the larger school community and their ideas are taken seriously.

As mentioned earlier, the process significantly alters the role of teachers within the larger educational community. Especially, as the work of teacher researchers gains value and legitimation within educational discourse, teachers themselves feel empowered to become increasingly involved. As proof of this, teacher researchers are increasingly taking part in state and national conferences, submit their work to journals for widespread dissemination, and create their own forums for collaboration, such as in on-line journals and discussion groups.

## **Reform Schools**

The combined effect of the previously mentioned potential benefits of teacher research culminates in yet another school reform. Brause and Mayher (1999) write, “Teacher researchers are at the forefront of educational reform, collaborating in the establishment of local policies at the decision making level, including participating in school-based management teams, as knowledgeable, informed educators” (p. 208). Just as in the example offered by Moher et al., teachers involved in teacher research groups at the school level are given a role in the establishment of local and districts policies. In this case the reform goes beyond individual classrooms to impact the school community.

Teacher research alters the traditional paradigm of educational research and, university-based school reform initiatives. As teacher researchers and their findings increasingly find a place within the academy, their work serves to provide new insights into research on teaching and learning and, potentially, government policy. At the same time teacher researchers often alter classroom practices and, through their work in collaborative groups share their findings with other teachers.

## **Change Society**

Probably the most exciting opportunity for school reform appears in the work of critical teacher researchers. Here the transformations are most radical. Johnston (2005) writes:

On this [critical] view, we are encouraged to critique the social norms and practices that underlie our teaching practices and that may obstruct schooling for social justice. From this point of view, it is not enough to examine only teaching practice; teachers must also consider social and political influences on the teacher and students, as well as on schooling more generally (n.p.).

Rather than study specific classroom strategies or practices, some teacher researchers look beyond their classroom context to explore the political and social issues that impact student learning. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994) this has the potential to alter the culture of teaching. They argue:

Furthermore, because teacher research makes visible the ways teachers and students negotiate power, authority, and knowledge in classrooms and schools, it has the potential to alter profoundly the cultures of teaching - how teachers work with their students toward a more critical and democratic pedagogy, how they build intellectual communities of colleagues who are both educators and activists, and how they position themselves in relationship to school administrators, policymakers, and university-based experts as agents of systemic change (p. 36).

The democratic pedagogy that results from critically oriented teacher research leads to more democratic schools and educational communities. In the past this work has been done mostly in the United Kingdom and Australia. However, it appears that more American educators are becoming interested in the emancipatory possibilities of teacher research.

In Britain, Stenhouse's work led to a notion of teachers as intellectuals. For Stenhouse and his colleagues at CARE and the Ford Teaching Project, teachers fundamentally alter their position relative to university based educators and governmental and administrative policy makers when they pursue teacher research. This not only led to a sense of agency but also, emancipation from constraints on their choices, opportunities, and goals. Further, it leads to the growth of solidarity among teachers and with university educators, especially as they engaged in research as part of collaborative groups.

Similarly, the work of Australian teacher researchers seeks emancipatory outcomes (Bunbury et al., 1991; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1997; McTaggart, 1991). Importantly, in Australia, university-based facilitators of teacher research worked hard to overtly include all participants in all portions of the research process including determining the focus of inquiry, methods, and plan of action. Their version of participatory action research emancipated the “researched” – placing them in control of the research process. One notable example is McTaggart’s (1991) work with Aboriginal groups in which he offers his expertise simply for its usefulness in fulfilling the desires and needs of the community.

The work of action researchers like McTaggart’s is often tied directly to the work of critical theorists. Often mentioned, for example, is Freire (1972) and his notions of “co-investigation” and “praxis.” This is especially true in parts of the world where participatory action research has been used to improve adult education and empower the working poor (e.g. Freire, 1972). Also, much of the work connects to Habermas’ (1972) notions of emancipatory knowledge and public language.

In the U.S., there has been some interest in the field of critical teacher research. Hollingsworth and Sockett (1994), for instance, are well-known for their work with collaborative teacher research groups and the use of feminist theory. Kincheloe (1991 & 1995) has argued in favor of critical teacher research to replace what he regards as the practically-oriented but potentially “dangerous” brand of teacher research. For him all research is political in nature and those that claim to be objective hide their true politics under rhetoric. As such, he argues that practical teacher research simply maintains the status quo or, worse, lends credence to positivist research ideologies.

Another critical study of teacher research projects conducted by Brown and Jones (2001) uses postmodernism as the lens for analysis. Here teacher research narratives are analyzed to uncover the teachers' constructed notions about teaching and learning at the elementary school level and about the research process. Importantly, their work points out that teacher research challenges meta-narratives or the "grand narratives" offered by traditional, university-based educators. The authors write:

... we seek for ourselves and the students we work with both 'empowerment' and 'emancipation.' We want to learn to 'think critically' so that we are able then to recognize the ways in which dominant ideologies and social structures work at coercing and oppressing. Moreover, from a feminist perspective we are prompted to work at securing gender equity, autonomy and liberation both within and outside educational contexts (p. 18).

The notion of teacher research leading to social change is the most radically transformative of the possible benefits. Collectively the teacher research literature provides a host of exciting possibilities of classroom-based research. The benefits, described in this review of the literature, include alleviating the gap between theory and practice; enhancing teacher education; improving teacher professional development; improving student learning; affirming and empowering teachers; reforming schools; and changing society.

Related to these perceived benefits, there is a divide in the literature between those who advocate for practical or critical teacher research. Practical teacher research takes on the day-to-day issues teachers face. Critical teacher research seeks to not only better the classroom but also society and confronts political and social issues, especially as they relate to classroom dynamics.

## Practical Teacher Research

According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), teacher research theorized as practical inquiry is a “way to generate or enhance practical knowledge” (p. 19). In an overview of the different forms of teacher research, they explain that “theorizers in this group assume that some of the most essential knowledge for teaching is practical knowledge” (p. 19). Here the day-to-day judgments and practices of teachers are elevated to a greater importance in understanding teaching and learning. Within practical inquiry “teachers’ professional knowledge landscapes” (Clandinin & Connolly, 1995) and “craft knowledge” (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992) are studied.

Proponents of practical teacher research argue that such inquiry can illuminate important issues of teachers and their students and, through reflection on practice, generate knowledge about teaching and learning. The emphasis repeatedly is on “real classrooms and real schools” (Allan & Miller, 1990, p. 196). For instance, Falk and Blumenreich (2005) write, “Conducting research has helped teachers we know to consolidate new knowledge, learn about new issues, and develop new teaching methods and strategies” (p. 176). Implicit in this theory is the *practicality* of teacher research for teachers and schools. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), “practical inquiry is more likely to respond to the immediacy of the knowledge needs teachers confront in everyday practice and to be foundational for formal research by providing new questions and concerns” (p. 19). Glanz (1999) similarly describes the practical goals of action research in his article directed toward school administrators. He writes:

Action research is a kind of research that has reemerged as a popular way of helping practitioners, teachers, and supervisors to better understand their work. In action research, we apply traditional research approaches (e.g. ethnographic, descriptive, quasi-experimental, and so forth) to real

problems or issues faced by the practitioner. Action research can be as simple as raising a question about some educational practice and collecting information to answer the question, or as complicated as applying a t test to determine whether posttest result from an experimental group are statistically significant. Because action researchers usually never use very large samples, results are almost never generalizable. Yet action research, in its many forms, can help practitioners gain valuable insights about their work (p. 301).

Glanz not only emphasizes the practicality of action research but downplays its legitimacy outside of individual classrooms in favor of understanding particular issues faced by specific teachers.

Similarly MacLean and Mohr's *Teacher-Researchers at Work* (2004) used in the *Teacher as Researcher I and II* course emphasizes practical teacher research. The authors make it clear from the outset that they are writing from the perspective of high school English teachers who:

...wanted to add our voices to the professional discourse, to remind our colleagues that teacher-researchers deserve a place in the educational community as people who make informed decisions based on their research about the conduct, content, and practice of the profession (p. vi).

They emphasize the assumption "that teachers are thinkers and inquirers with knowledge about teaching and learning" and, accordingly "we don't 'prepare' or 'train' teachers to ask the 'right' questions in the 'right' way" (p. vii). They offer the following definition of the work of teacher researchers:

It [teacher research] is research conducted by teachers as they go about their daily work. It is enmeshed in the context of the classroom. It is designed so as not to expose students to harm in any way but rather to include them as participants in the process through which they and their teacher learn about learning. It offers students the model of an adult learner at work. It is an open inquiry, not a hidden agenda. It is based on teacher and student knowledge and thinking as a source of information (p. ix).



They advise teachers to ask questions about teaching and learning within the classroom and offer these examples: “Why do so many students fail this part of the course? Why was this lesson so successful? What can I do to motivate my students to learn? You develop your own question from your thinking about your work (p.1).” Repeatedly the authors emphasize practicality in the process of teacher research and call on teachers to research questions that strike their curiosity and have importance within the classroom context.

The method of teacher research, the emphasis on inquiry, and the pragmatic aims all allude to the work of Dewey. I am not the first however to make a connection between the work of Dewey and the modern teacher as researcher movement. His influence is mentioned in histories of teacher research (e.g. Carr and Kemmis, 1986; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Noffke, 1997). Johnston (2005) more overtly links the work of Dewey with the process of teacher research:

There is an assumption underlying these research approaches that we benefit from a careful reflective attitude that examines what we are doing as teachers and the consequences of our actions for students and student learning. This is a very Deweyan idea—that reflection and inquiry create and inform future purposes (n.p.).

Johnston captures the emphasis Dewey placed on the process or method of inquiry which he insisted must become “persistent.” So too, Cochran Smith and Lytle (1993) write, “Dewey emphasized the importance of teachers' reflecting on their practices and integrating their observations into their emerging theories of teaching and learning” (p. 9). Dewey’s relationship to teacher research centers on his belief in the importance of teacher reflection and inquiry. He believed that teachers who develop these skills become better teachers.

## **Critical Teacher Research**

Teacher research envisioned as social inquiry or “critical action research” departs radically from the notions of classroom-based research as envisioned by Glanz, MacLean, Mohr, and others. While here too method and process are emphasized, the results or outcomes receive the most attention. Here the aim is social change and movement toward a more just and democratic society (e.g. Elliot, 1991, 1997; Gitlin & Hadden, 1997; Gore & Zeichner, 1995; Kemmis & Grundy, 1997; Kincheloe, 1991; Noffke, 1991, 1997). Rather than describe schools and classrooms, the goal involves changing educational structures and transforming society. “The emphasis is on transforming educational theory and practice toward emancipatory ends and thus raising fundamental questions about curriculum, teachers' roles, and the ends as well as the means of schooling” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 18).

Proponents of the critical theory of teacher research often refer to the work of a variety of critical theorists and are influenced by European critical, social, and economic theory, feminist theory, and the notion of pedagogy as praxis (e.g. Brown & Jones, 2001). As mentioned before, notable figures include those related to the Frankfurt school such as Habermas and his notion of “the emancipatory interest of knowledge.” For example Kincheloe (1995) writes that “Action research in education critically defined is not content to confine teachers as researchers to the task of collating what they and their colleagues already know” (p. 81). He goes on to write, “The critical teacher researcher asks questions of deep structure of his or her school or classroom settings -- in other words, he or she takes Habermas's notion of emancipatory interest of knowledge seriously” (p. 81). Also, significant in the critical theory of teacher research are Friere’s

notion of “co-investigation” (1972) and Giroux and MacLaren’s (1986) argument in favor of teachers as “transformative intellectuals.” Just as “The intent of the critical theorist is openly emancipatory: the goals are enlightenment and empowerment and transformation of society” (Armento, 1991, p. 87), so too the critical theorist of teacher research seeks to involve the researched in a more democratized process of inquiry that results in fundamental change. Returning to Kincheloe (1995), he writes, “Obviously, critical theory-based teacher research attempts not simply to understand or describe the world of practice but to change it” (p. 77) and “The purpose of critical action research, thus, is not to produce data and better theories about education -- it is to produce a metatheoretical understanding supported by reflection and grounded in socio-historical context” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, cited in Kincheloe, 1995, p. 78). Kincheloe and other proponents of critical teacher research repeatedly emphasize the change and socio-historical aspects of critical teacher research. Teacher research, critically defined, they argue, seeks to interrogate the structures, processes, and practices of education and to change them. They are not content to confine teachers to reciting what is already known.

Educators who theorize teacher research as social inquiry criticize “versions of teacher research that have goals that are more or less instrumental and/or that lack clear connections to larger social and political agendas” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1995, p. 20). One main line of this critique holds that such “benign” versions of teacher research ignore political and social issues. For example, Noffke (1997) argues practical versions of teacher research are separated from the “political sphere” and, according to Zeichner (1994), they serve to “further solidify and justify practice that is harmful to students” (p.

66). At the same time the critique proposes that teacher research as practical inquiry disregards the historical roots of teacher and action research.

A severe critic of “benign” forms of teacher research, Kincheloe (1995) argues that uncritical teacher research is "dangerous" in that it "upholds status quo" practices and "reproduces extant ideology" (p. 82). Teacher research with "its democratic edge blunted" only serves to promote a restricted view of teachers' roles while supporting the notion that teachers are incapable of developing critical perspectives. He writes, "Action-research concepts such as the promotion of greater teacher self-understanding of his or her practices, conceptual change, and an appreciation of the social forces that shape the school are ignored in the traditional teacher research classes" (p. 71).

The work of critical teacher researchers differs from that of practical teacher researchers in that it aims to transform society beyond the classroom; the results of critical teacher research are more radical. Discussions of this form of research, while descriptive about the process, tend to emphasize the outcomes. It appears that in defining a teacher research project as critical or practical the intended outcome should be considered.

In order to summarize the differences in the related literature, I created Table 1. This table demonstrates the major differences between the two types of teacher research – practical and critical – as described in the literature. I have taken the points emphasized by proponents of each type of teacher research to create a list of key elements.

Table 1

*A Summary: Practical Teacher Research Compared to Critical Teacher Research*

Practical Teacher Research:	Critical Teacher Research:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Practical-Deliberative” (McKernan, 1996)</li> <li>• Concerned with practical knowledge or “craft knowledge”</li> <li>• Interest in day-to-day issues of practice</li> <li>• May result in improved practice and student performance but not social or cultural change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Critical-Emancipatory” (McKernan, 1996)</li> <li>• Concerned with social and cultural factors that impact school</li> <li>• Interest in democratic participation and emancipation</li> <li>• Seeks deep change [enlightenment] within the classroom</li> <li>• Implicit goal towards improving society.</li> </ul>

Since there is no real dialogue in the literature between the two (other than critical teacher researchers’ critique of practical research) it appears as if the two types are separated across a divide with little middle ground. A dichotomy has been created by current proponents of both types of research.

### Conclusion

This review of the literature on teacher research establishes the context for my study. I provide historical background and an overview of current literature. It presents the trajectory of teacher research not only in the United States but in the United Kingdom and Australia since educators there particularly influenced the growth of critical teacher research. I also review current research studies and give an overview of purported benefits related to teacher research. This review demonstrates the need for studies on teacher research, especially in the social studies. Teacher research fits with the aims of

the social studies including inquiry, democracy, and social justice. Unfortunately there have been few studies examining the impact of teacher research on social studies teaching and learning. I also point out a division in the literature on teacher research between practical teacher research and critical teacher research. There is little dialogue between proponents of either type of teacher research. My study builds on current literature on teacher research by exploring the relationship between teacher research and the social studies as well as determining whether a middle ground exists between practical and critical versions of teacher research. I determine this by examining the extent to which teachers pursued critical inquiry in the teacher research process. I will return to this review of the literature in the final chapter in order to describe the implications of my study relevant to the larger educational discourse on teacher research.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

I used qualitative methods or “naturalistic inquiry” (Merriam, 1988) to answer the research question, “Through the teacher research experience, to what extent did social studies teachers pursue critical inquiry into classroom practices?” In recording a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the teacher research experiences of the members of the social studies cohort, I describe the multiple and varied ways they pursued critical inquiry. In defining my research as “qualitative” I concur with Preissle-Goetz and LeCompte (1991), that “It [Qualitative research] is characterized as based on the assumptions that reality is ever changing and only incompletely knowable, that knowledge consists of always tentatively held understandings” (p. 59). My research differed from more positivist or experimental designs which test a clearly defined hypothesis or theory. This study was intended to be non-experimental, descriptive, and inductive; more concerned with generating new theory based on the phenomena under study.

Specifically, I applied the case-study method as defined by Merriman (1988) – “A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 21). This method was well-suited to my study of teacher research, since I hoped to better understand teacher research and the types of

research questions the members of the social studies cohort asked. According to Merriam (1988) case studies are “particularistic,” “descriptive,” “heuristic,” and “inductive.” In creating a case study, I aimed to fulfill the following attributes as outlined by Merriam:

The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon. Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences. These insights can be construed as a tentative hypothesis that helps structure future research; hence, case study plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base (p. 32).

By creating a case study of the work of social studies teacher researchers I provided new insights into an area of educational research relatively under-studied. This study described their experiences and offered new insights about critical inquiry conducted by teachers.

### **Context of the Study**

This study focused on one *particular* group of fourteen social studies teachers who were part of a cohort in the M.Ed. program and took a two semester course, *Teacher as Researcher*. All fourteen experienced teachers in the social studies cohort and their course instructor took part in this study. Table 2, *Study Participants: Social Studies Cohort*, presents the teachers' demographic information – race, gender, years of experience, and grade level taught. In the *Teacher as Researcher* course, each participant completed a teacher research project. I have also listed the topics of these projects in Table 2. In fulfilling the particularistic nature of case studies, according to Merriam (1988), "a case study is an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group. The bounded system, or case,



might be selected because it is an instance of some concern, issue, or hypothesis" (p. 9-10).

Table 2

*Study Participants: Social Studies Cohort*

Names*	Gender	Race	Years Exp.	Grade level	Subject of teacher research projects
Dan	Male	African-American	8	High school	Differentiation and culturally relevant pedagogy
Evan	Male	Caucasian	28	High school	Latino students in U.S. history
Tyler	Male	Caucasian	8	High school	Connection between perceived effort and success
Tom	Male	Caucasian	12	High school	Collaborative learning and inquiry-based learning
Ben	Male	Caucasian	10	High school	Cooperative learning
Kim	Female	Caucasian	8	High school	i-Movies and AP US history
Mandy	Female	Caucasian	6	High school	Lessons based on multiple intelligences
Amy	Female	Caucasian	7	High school	Plagiarism
Mark	Male	Caucasian	6	Middle school	Using a variety of historical sources to improve student engagement
Zack	Male	Caucasian	8	Middle school	Political cartoons
Jim	Male	Caucasian	7	Middle school	Modifications for exceptional children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)
Mary	Female	Caucasian	8	Middle school	Improving communication between students and teachers
Erin	Female	Caucasian	15	Middle school	African-American males and achievement
Bridgett	Female	Caucasian	25	Middle school	Cooperative learning and student comprehension

\*Note: Pseudonyms replace teacher names.

Since this group of teachers provides a “bounded” case of social studies teachers, it provides a rich source of study. No attempt was made to compare this case to other

cohorts within the same program or with other teachers who also took the course from the same instructor. The table above illustrates the range of levels of experience and the balance between male and female, middle and high school teachers. There was only one African American who took part in this study; the other thirteen teachers were Caucasian. Importantly, the group also represents a wide range of experience levels from six years to twenty eight years.

### **Master's of Education for Experienced Teachers**

All of the participants were enrolled in the social studies cohort enrolled of the M.Ed. for Experienced Teachers program at a large public university in the Southeast beginning in the spring of 2003. This 31 credit program emphasized graduate studies for experienced teachers in a part time, off campus setting. Successful graduates received an advanced licensure (teachers in the state receive an “M license” in the same specialty area of their previous “A license”). For the social studies cohort the program extended over five semesters and three summer terms. As defined by the program, three major themes made up the framework of the program of studies: “Teacher as Change Agent,” “Teacher as Researcher,” and “Teacher as Content Area Specialist.”

To support the teachers’ development as “content area specialists” the program emphasized pedagogical content knowledge by grouping teachers in content-specific cohorts. The teachers in this study were grouped in the 8-12 Social Studies cohort when they enrolled and they remained with this same group until graduation. They took several course related specifically to social studies pedagogy and content knowledge.

In addition to courses on social studies pedagogical knowledge and content, they took “core courses” that included a variety of topics and were generally geared to the

relevant needs of social studies teachers. For example, EDUC 196 *Assessment and Accountability* was taught from the perspective of the social studies, especially with a view to the end-of-course tests that appeared in the state mandated curriculum. Table 3 illustrates the course of study as well as the placement of *Teacher as Researcher I and II* for the members of the social studies cohort

Table 3

*Masters of Education for Experienced Teachers Program of Study*

Semester	Course Number and Title
Spring 2003	EDUC 115E <i>Social Studies and Humanities for Teaching and Learning</i>
Summer 2003	EDUC 116 <i>Reinventing Teaching</i> *
Fall 2003	EDUC 194B <i>Teaching and Differentiation</i> *  EDUC 195B <i>Contemporary Research for Social Studies Teaching and Learning</i>
Spring 2004	EDUC 195G <i>Cultural Diversity and Global Education in the Social Studies</i>  EDUC 293B <i>Ways of Knowing</i> *
Summer 2004	EDUC 196 <i>Assessment and Accountability</i> *  EDUC 198 A <i>Informing Social Studies Pedagogy and Learning A</i>
Fall 2004	<b>EDUC 193 <i>Teacher as Researcher I</i>*</b>  EDUC 194A <i>Teaching and Differentiation</i> *
Spring 2005	EDUC 198B <i>Informing Social Studies Pedagogy and Learning B</i>  <b>EDUC 292 <i>Teacher as Researcher II</i>*</b>

Summer 2005	EDUC 295 <i>Teacher Leadership and Democratic Society</i> *
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Note: \* indicates “core course”

### **Teacher as Researcher Course**

The teacher research course was divided over two semesters – two hours in the fall (2004) semester and one hour in the spring (2005) semester. According to the instructor this was done to allow the teachers adequate time to conduct their teacher research projects -- the major assignment of the course. The course text was *Teacher-Researchers at Work* (MacLean & Mohr, 2004) and the class met face-to-face about once a month. The course syllabus created by the instructor listed the following course objectives:

Teachers enrolled in this course will be able to:

- Engage in deliberate, systematic inquiry and reflection on their practice.
- Appreciate the value of teacher research for understanding and improving their practice.
- Arrive at their own working definition of teacher-research – what it is, why it is done, and how it is done
- Collaborate with fellow teacher researchers throughout all phases of the research process.
- Develop a research study by forming a question, planning strategies for collecting and analyzing their data, and interpreting and summarizing their findings in a final research report.

Leading to the completion of the final teacher research report, the teachers were expected to hand in periodic research plans. The instructor provided a prompt for each plan by listing a series of guiding questions. The first of these, the “Research Interest Paper” was due in late September. It was followed by “Research Plan I through III”. The guiding questions for “Research Plan I” were:

- 1) After further reflection and discussions with your research group, what aspect of your teaching are you interested in studying?
- 2) Why are you interested in studying this part of your practice?
- 3) At this point, how do you think you might gather information to help you better understand your teaching?
- 4) Why use this method(s) of data collection?
- 5) How might you analyze your data?
- 6) When can you collect and analyze your data?
- 7) Who can help you with your research project?
- 8) What is your next step in planning and implementing your research project?

The proceeding research plans built on Plan I (e.g. Plan II asked “What have you learned so far from working on your study?” and so on). The instructor gave detailed written feedback on all of the research plans.

Between class sessions the social studies teachers met in “small group meetings” to discuss their teacher research. The teachers submitted reports of these meetings.

According to the course syllabus:

Small groups must meet at least once between each class session and a member of the group must send a summary report after each meeting. The report should contain the following information:

- 1) date and time of the group meeting
- 2) members present
- 3) issues or topics discussed
- 4) the type of assistance provided to one another during the discussion of teacher-research projects

In practice the teacher research groups formed based on relative geographic location. For example, four teachers that lived in a neighboring city all met together and the four teachers who taught at the same school also formed a small research group. The instructor provided the groups with a handout titled “Responding to Teacher-Researchers’ Work” which described the “group functions” and “techniques and prompts” to guide their meetings. The instructor instituted these small research meetings because the class met so few times face-to-face during the semester and he wanted to

maintain continuity between class sessions and encourage collaboration between the cohort members.

In class the instructor did a variety of activities – including round table discussions of teachers’ research ideas, reviews of sample teacher research reports, and instruction on the research process. The instructor offered detailed suggestion about how to collect and analyze data and write up findings. The teachers were encouraged to involve their students in the research process by surveying and interviewing them and analyzing their work.

### **Role of Researcher**

Beginning in the fall of 2003 I worked with the social studies cohort as the teaching assistant (TA). My role as TA included working with the group throughout their program of studies; I attended every course even as the instructor changed and my duties depended on the individual instructor’s needs.

In the *Teacher as Researcher* course the instructor offered me the opportunity to teach portions of classes and bring in examples from the field of social studies. I also helped assess the rough-drafts and final research reports the teachers in the course turned in by providing written feedback on the papers.

My background in social studies and teaching meant that my interests aligned with those of the cohort members. Prior to my doctoral work, I taught U.S. and world history at a suburban, public school in North Carolina. I also received a Master’s degree in European history. I was often able to talk to teachers about my experiences and drew on them heavily when I took part in class instruction. Throughout the two years that I

spent with the cohort I began to know them personally and became more familiar with their backgrounds. I would describe my relationship with the cohort members as “friendly professional” since we did not develop friendships that translated outside of the classroom. While, the documentary data was collected while the cohort members were still students, analysis did not begin until they graduated and signed consent forms to participate in my research study.

This study also *described* (the second characteristic of Merriam’s (1988) case study method) specifically the types of questions these social studies teachers explored, the methods they used, the implications of their projects, and their experiences in the role of teacher researcher. This study portrayed the course, the materials and support offered to the teachers, and the intentions and role of the instructor. By presenting the analysis of both documentary and interview data I provided a “thick description” of the cohort’s experiences with teacher research.

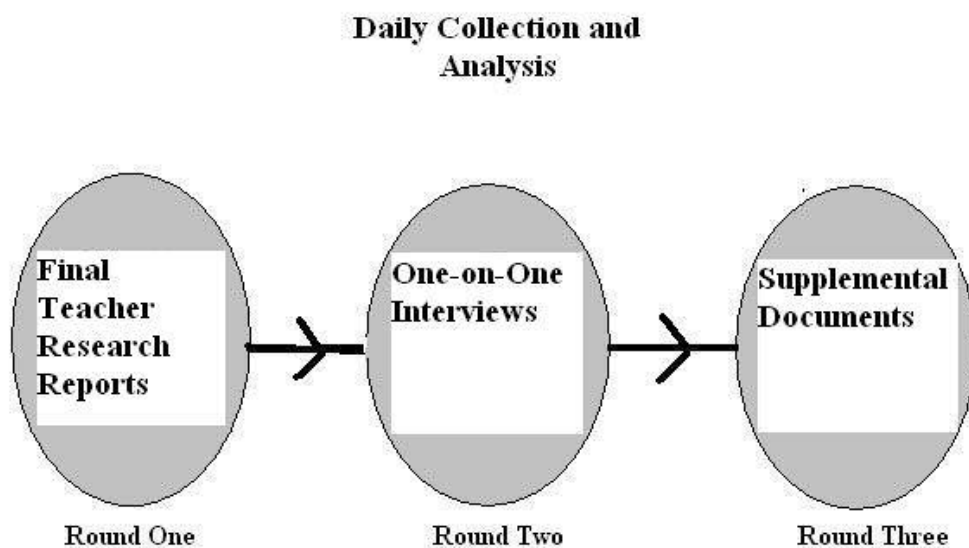
This case study served as a *heuristic* – a mode of inquiry to better understand the phenomenon of teacher research – Merriam’s (1988) third characteristic of case studies. By exploring the experiences of this cohort and their instructor, the study illustrated the variety of outcomes of teacher research as well as the contributing factors. According to Merriam the case study as heuristic “illuminate[s] the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study” and “This can bring about the discovering of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience, or confirm what is known” (p. 13). My case study, situated in the literature related to teacher research, not only sought to describe the experiences of the teachers involved but also shed light on two areas previously

overlooked – learning to engage in critical inquiry and establishing the relevancy of teacher research to the social studies.

Merriam writes that case studies are *inductive* – they rely on inductive reasoning and have “only a tentative, working philosophy at the beginning of the study, subject to change” (p. 13). This study built on and extends the conclusions of other studies on teacher research to better understand the phenomenon. I contend that rather than two alternative forms of teacher research existing, practical and critical, a continuum - revealing the existence of a middle ground between the two types of inquiry – may be a better descriptor of the teacher research experiences of the social studies cohort. I used two major sources of data – documents and interviews in making this contention. My data collection and analysis occurred in three rounds; illustrated in Figure 1. Note that the data collection and analysis in each round built on the previous round.

Figure 1

*Data Collection and Analysis Flow Chart*





## **Data Collection & Analysis Round One – Final Research Reports**

Round one focused primarily on the final teacher research reports written by the experienced social studies teachers. Analysis of documents as a means to better understand teacher research appears repeatedly in previous studies on this topic (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1994, Gall et al., 2005; Levin & Rock, 2005; Mohr et al., 2004; Rogers, et al., 1990). The final teacher reports were the final assignment of a two semester course, *Teacher as Researcher I and II*, the students took in the fall (2004) and spring (2005) prior to their graduation in August 2005.

Document or artifact analysis is a particularly robust form of data in qualitative research (Merriam, 1988; Holsti, 1969; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Riely, 1963) and there are many benefits of using documents. Whereas in interviews and observations the researcher intrudes her own influence, documents are “stable” data sources since they are less likely to be altered by the participant observer. At the same time, the data can be used similarly to interview or observation data since it provides descriptive information that can be categorized and analyzed for new understandings of the phenomenon under study. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), documents “serve as sources of rich descriptions of how people who produced the materials think about the world” (p. 133).

After asking participants to signed informed consent forms, I began the first round of data collection and analysis. I received electronic copies of the final teacher research reports from the members of the social studies cohort and I began coding these documents by looking for key themes. I developed categories, themes, and tentative hypotheses using a “constant comparative method” (Glaser & Straus, 1967). In keeping with my research question, I paid particular attention to the extent to which the teachers

pursued critical inquiry as they completed their teacher research project. I re-read the documents multiple times and then drew a matrix on a large piece of chart paper to compare themes across the cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Using the documents as a starting point, I developed an initial understanding of the teacher researchers' experiences and identified themes and categories for analysis. By examining the documents created by the experienced teacher educators, I not only learned the questions they asked in their research, but also the ways they went about researching them, and their reflections on the process (both in the final drafts and related documents). Based on my initial analysis of the final research reports, I moved on to the second round of my data collection and analysis – one-on-one interviews.

### **Data Collection & Analysis Round Two – Interviews**

The next step was to conduct one-on-one interviews with each member of the social studies cohort and the course instructor. Generally, interviews within the qualitative paradigm are viewed as interactive conversations with a purpose. Holstein writes, “While these conversations may vary from highly structured, standardized, quantitatively oriented survey interviews, to semi-formal guided conversations and free flowing informational exchanges, all interviews are interactional” (p. 111). Implicit in Holstein and other qualitative researchers' approach to interviews is a sense of the researcher working along-side the respondent. Taken a step further some view both the interviewer and the person interviewed as engaged in a process of “constructing” knowledge together. Holstein writes:

Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled

in the interview encounter. Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge – treasuries of information awaiting excavation, so to speak – as they are constructors knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. Participation in an interview involves meaning-making work (p. 114).

Differing from traditional notions of interviewing, Holstein advances “active interviewing” in which both the interviewer and respondent are engaged in a process of determining not only “what” but also “how.”

Bruner (1987) similarly writes in “Life as Narrative” that while the life people share in conversations such as interviews may not be entirely “true,” nonetheless, they hold value in that they demonstrate the individual’s conception of her life, built amidst a tumult of cultural and social forces. To him the story of one’s life is “reflexive” -- the constructed (public) self is internalized and often carried out in actions and verbalized in the sharing of ideas. Bruner writes:

I believed that the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future. I have argued that a life as led is inseparable from a life as told – or more bluntly, a life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted (p. 30).

While from Bruner’s perspective, this may make open-ended interview data less “objective,” this data source reflects the “interpretation” of the event as internalized by the interviewee.

Keeping in mind the ideas of Holstein, Bruner, and other qualitative researchers, I purposely set out to engage in semi-structured interviews with the fourteen members of the cohort and the course instructor. I developed interview protocols (included in the appendix - see Appendix A and B) that allowed for open-ended responses. In forming

the interview questions, I wanted to understand how the teacher researchers viewed themselves as inquirers in the classroom and what they felt resulted from their inquiry.

I was able to make the interview questions more specific based on my initial analysis of the final research reports. For instance, if a teacher mentioned a particular text in their final research report, I asked about this during the interview. I tried to make the interview questions purposely open-ended and these seemed to have the desired effect of allowing the interviews to flow as if in conversation or dialogue. I scheduled the one-on-one interviews at times convenient for the teachers. I used an audio recorder and took notes during the interviews

As planned I also interviewed the course instructor (see Appendix B). Our one-on-one interview occurred after I had interviewed all fourteen teachers and began my initial data analysis. His interview responses were invaluable in considering my initial analysis of both the course documents and the interview transcripts. I used most of the data from this interview to describe the context of the course that led to the teacher research experience.

After each interview, I transcribed the audio tape verbatim and also added my own narrative at the bottom to create an “interview log” (Merriman, 1988). I then coded these transcriptions in a similar manner to the final research reports. I added the major themes I uncovered in my analysis of the interview transcripts to the matrices on the chart paper. Using a constant-comparative method, I refined themes from my initial analysis of the final teacher research reports and added or deleted where appropriate.

### **Data Collection & Analysis Round Three – Supplemental Documents**

In round three, I consulted supporting documents as necessary in clarifying my analysis. These documents included the course documents (syllabus, handouts, reading assignments, course text, and researcher class notes) which I consulted to enhance my understanding of the context in which the teachers pursued teacher research. An assignment that the faculty cohort leader gave the teachers as a program exit assignment in their final class was particularly helpful in describing the teachers and their motivation to pursue a M.Ed. The research plans and the small research group reports submitted to the course instructor illustrated the evolution of the teacher researchers' projects over time. A systematic search for emergent themes from this data was conducted and, added to the themes mapped out on the chart paper.

It was in round 3 that I entered what, Glesne (1999) referred to as the “the code mines.” I found myself with a plentitude of data and needed to re-sort and re-compare the codes or themes across the case and across the two major sources of data – the final research reports and the interview transcriptions. I tried to follow Glesne's advice that, “By putting like-minded pieces together into data clumps, you create an organizational framework” (p. 137). Again, I repeatedly returned to the chart paper and mapped out key themes and comparisons across the case.

### **Validity**

According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), it is the researcher's duty to present “a more or less honest rendering of how informants actually view themselves and their experiences” (p. 98). Several efforts were made to ensure the validity of the case study:

triangulation, member checks, peer examination, and openness about the researchers' bias. Through these efforts, I feel confident that my representations of the experiences of the cohort members with teacher research represent a fair and accurate portrayal.

According to Merriam (1988) triangulation includes, "using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings" (p. 168). I used two types of data –documents and interviews – from multiple sources. My use of interview data helped to confirm (or disconfirm) my interpretations of the final research reports.

The interviews also served as member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1988) by giving me the opportunity to ask questions of the teacher researchers and their instructor about the final research reports. In addition, I sent, via e-mail, an electronic copy of the interview transcription to each participant; all of the teachers "signed off" on my using them in my final study report.

Changes to my study drafts were also based on feedback from peer evaluation of my research. My advisor read portions of my study periodically. Another graduate student read and commented on portions of my study. I also took part in a peer-mentoring group of graduate students. With this group I discussed my research ideas, the way I pursued my research, and my tentative findings. Peer examination ensured validity since my peers were able to detect researcher bias and alert me to it within my study. At the same time I included a detailed description of my role as teaching assistant and my relationship with the members of the cohort. Throughout my analysis of the data, I reflected on the way my relationship with the teacher researchers and the instructor was influencing my conclusions. Combined, these methods - triangulation, member checks,

peer evaluation, and awareness of researcher bias – along with my two pronged approach to the collection and analysis of data strengthened my case study.

### **Conclusion**

In conjunction with the postmodern theoretical framework that guided my study, I used qualitative methods to analyze data. By focusing on individualized and contextualized experiences I upheld the postmodernist critique of the notion of universal truths or meta-narratives and positivism. According to Glesne (1999) qualitative research aligns with the postmodernist paradigm since it seeks to “understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (p. 5). In order to answer the research question, “Through the teacher research experience, to what extent did social studies teachers pursue critical inquiry into classroom practices?” I collected data from multiple sources and perspectives and then coded the data in vivo. As a result of my data analysis I was able to make the conclusions which I describe in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS**

To answer the research question that framed this study, “Through the teacher research experience, to what extent did social studies teachers pursue critical inquiry into classroom practices?” I analyzed a variety of data, including the final teacher research reports, one-on-one interviews, and supplementary document evidence. I found that the members of the social studies cohort pursued critical inquiry to varying degrees. This related to the topics the teachers studied and the changes that occurred as a result of their research. To describe the differences in the projects conducted by members of the social studies cohort, I grouped them into four areas – practical teacher research that resulted in little classroom change, practical teacher research that resulted in classroom change, critical teacher research that resulted in classroom change, and critical teacher research that resulted in classroom and school change. The grouping serves as an organizational framework for the presentation of my findings. It is not meant to create a narrow or positivist definition of the group characteristics but, rather to help describe the differences in inquiry that occurred when the members of the social studies cohort engaged in teacher research.

The teacher researchers were grouped based on the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry. This was determined by the topics of the questions the teachers asked, the



way they went about studying the questions, and the impact of the research on the teachers and their students. In other words, I looked for patterns in how the teachers answered the main question posed to them by the instructor “What aspect of your teaching are you passionately interested in understanding more deeply?”

To illustrate the relationship between the four groups and to describe their differences, I created a continuum of critical inquiry (Figure 2). The continuum illustrates the differences in the extent to which the teachers pursued critical inquiry and represents the relative locations of the four groups, indicated by the various shades. This continuum is based on my attempt to interpret the data in this study within the conceptual framework of teacher research already existing in educational literature. The continuum is meant to provide an alternative to the exclusive distinction made within the literature between practical and critical teacher research by imagining a middle ground between “practical-deliberative,” and “critical-emancipatory” (McKernan, 1996) teacher research. Note that a “continuum” refers to “a continuous extent or whole, no part of which can be distinguished from neighboring parts except by arbitrary division” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2001). The arbitrary condition in this study comes from my research question, about the extent to which the teachers pursued critical inquiry. I view critical inquiry as careful, receptive [or open] judgment that leads to change. This change corresponds with the outcomes of critical teacher research (summarized in Table 1 previously) and includes democratization, emancipation, and social reform.

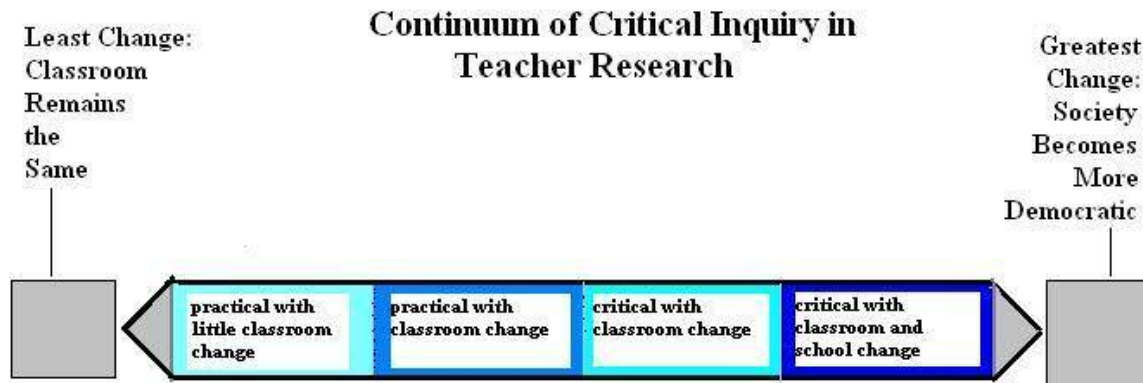
Another important feature of Figure 2 is that none of the projects created by members of the social studies cohort reside in the two poles: “least change” and “greatest change.” For all four groups the teacher research experience led them to pursue critical

inquiry, although to differing extents. The nature of teacher research process, asking questions, collecting data, and drawing conclusions, was a process that led to democratic change in the social and cultural aspects of the teachers' classroom. This had implications for both the teachers and their students.

The arrows on the continuum point to the possibility of teacher research heading in one of these two directions based on the extent of critical inquiry pursued. The intent is to create a sense of possible movement for each of the teacher researchers along the continuum.

Figure 2

*The Relative Extent to which Members of the Social Studies Cohort Pursued Critical Inquiry*



This method of interpreting the data and presenting my findings aligns with the postmodernist framework of the study. Described by Houser (2004), postmodernism is “an interdisciplinary intellectual movement that tends to reject the universal, structural,

mechanical, and hierarchical in favor of an emphasis on difference, multiplicity, and the context-specific nature of experience” (p. 54). My discussion of findings portrays the “difference, multiplicity, and the context-specific nature” of the social studies cohort’s experience with teacher research. I point out the differences between the four groups of teacher researchers, including the types of questions they asked and the implications of their studies. I also represent the multiple ways teachers pursued critical inquiry and include a description of the context in which their studies took place.

The next four sections describe in more detail the projects that I have grouped as practical teacher research that resulted in little classroom change, practical teacher research that resulted in classroom change, critical teacher research that resulted in classroom change, and critical teacher research that resulted in classroom and school change. Table 4 illustrates the organizing framework by listing each group, the participants that make up the group, and the topics of their research.

Table 4

*Teacher Researchers Organized in Groups*

Group	Names	Subject of teacher research projects
Practical with little classroom change	Ben	Cooperative learning
	Tom	Collaborative learning and inquiry-based learning
	Bridgett	Cooperative learning and student comprehension
Practical with class room change	Zach	Political cartoons
	Kim	i-Movies and AP U.S. history

	Mark	Using a variety of historical sources to improve student engagement
	Tyler	Connection between perceived effort and success
	Mandy	Lessons based on multiple intelligences
	Amy	Plagiarism
	Jim	Modifications for exceptional children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)
Critical with classroom change	Mary	Improving communication between students and teachers
	Dan	Differentiation and culturally relevant pedagogy
Critical with classroom and school change	Erin	African-American males and achievement
	Evan	Latino students in U.S. history

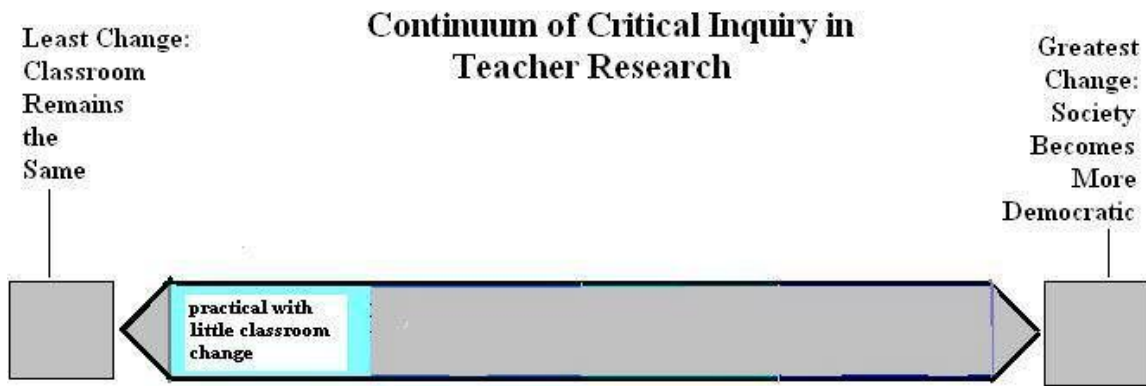
In each of the sections below I describe how the teacher researchers in the four groups answered the original question posed by the instructor, “What aspect of your teaching are you passionately interested in understanding more deeply?” and explore the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry. In addition to describing the topics of the teacher research projects, I offer contextual information about each teacher, evidence of the type of educational theory that guided their studies, and an overview of the impact of the teacher research process on the teachers and their students. I cite evidence from their final research reports, the one-on-one interviews, and ancillary documents. It is important to note that the teachers’ used pseudonyms in their research reports when referring to students and their colleagues. In cases where it was not clear whether proper names were replaced with pseudonyms in the teachers’ final research reports, I replaced them.

### **Practical Teacher Research that Resulted in Little Classroom Change**

The first group of teacher researchers made up of Bridgett, Ben, and Tom did not pursue critical inquiry to the same extent as other members of the social studies cohort. Their research on practical, classroom issues resulted in very little change in their classroom practices. These teachers' research did little to challenge their original assumptions and they did not consider their traditionally non-successful students in their research. Their position along the continuum of critical inquiry relative to the other members of the social studies cohort is depicted in Figure 3. Note that this group of teacher researchers occupies a position situated towards the practical teacher research end.

Figure 3

*Position of Practical Teacher Research that Resulted in Little Classroom Change*



Ben, Tom, and Bridgett examined pedagogical issues but exhibited less critical inquiry or “openness” in their research. They did not pay attention to student data, especially from marginalized students, in making conclusions about their research. As a result they learned little to inform their “craft knowledge” (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992) and exhibited only minor changes in their teaching practice as a result of teacher research.

Despite this lack of overt change, they did pursue critical inquiry to a certain extent. The act of following the teacher research process, of asking questions and studying their practice, was a democratizing event. It gave these teachers a space to confront the educational “experts” and provided an opportunity to engage in dialogue with colleagues and students. This opportunity for democratic conversation led to a greater sense of efficacy on the part of the teachers.

To explore the extent to which these teachers pursued critical inquiry, the following sections describe the teacher research projects they conducted. I provide an overview of the practical research questions they asked and the educational theory that

guided their studies. I also examine the impact of the projects on the teacher researchers and their students.

### **Practical Research Questions**

In Table 5 the topics of study are described in more detail in the words of the teacher researchers. These quotations were taken from their final research reports.

Table 5

#### *Practical Teacher Research with Little Classroom Change: Research Topics and Questions*

Teacher	Topic	Research Topic or Question
Ben	Cooperative learning	"...I decided to try both techniques [lecture and cooperative learning] throughout several lessons in my European Focus world history classes to find out which technique works best in my classroom for my students and myself."
Tom	Collaborative learning and inquiry-based learning	"In spite of success on the exam, and their positive feedback, I wondered if altering my pedagogical methods [toward more student-centered] would improve the class and student performance. Would it deepen student interest, engagement and understanding in history?"
Bridgett	Cooperative learning and student learning	"How is learning affected when students prepare chapter lessons in cooperative learning groups and then teach those to their peers?"

It is important to note that although all three teachers set out to study cooperative or collaborative learning, they phrase their questions in different ways. Ben and Tom both describe an interest in comparing cooperative learning to lecture, Ben to see which “works best” and Tom to see if it might improve student “engagement and understanding.” Bridgett wants to understand more deeply the learning gains associated with cooperative learning.

Ben, a white male, had been teaching high school history for 10 years at the time of this study. He seemed to be a successful teacher and well-liked at his school. In our one-on-one interview he described his role as a leader at his high school:

I started as a coach and I used to work with the minority population a lot. And I got on the security team and from there the SGC [school governance committee]. I like stability and direction and we have a lot of leadership openings...and [school name deleted] almost cries for leadership. There are so many different voices that I felt it necessary to go from clique to clique to clique to try to bring everything together.

As a result of his interest in trying to “bring everything together” he served on numerous committees, including a search committee for a new school principal. His students also seemed to like him. Several students gathered in his classroom to eat lunch on the day of our interview and several more knocked on his door. His students referred to him by his last name and appeared to have a friendly, joking relationship with him. The school in which he teaches was located in a predominately upper class area close to the local university. Prior to enrolling in the M.Ed. program Ben received his National Board Certification.

According to Ben, he created his teacher research project in response to the philosophy of teaching and learning he had been exposed to over the course of the M.Ed. program and in professional development workshops at the school and district level. For



Ben the process of asking questions about his practice gave him the opportunity to test the teaching philosophies he had learned about in the M.Ed. In his final research report he wrote:

However, the main focus of many experts brought in by our school district for professional development, and throughout the M.Ed. process, I have been told time and time again that the days of lecture and discussion are over. Cooperative learning groups are the way of the future. They say that students enjoy learning in this format and that they retain more information and develop higher level thinking skills with this technique, as students are using their own personal learning strengths and creativity. (Gregory-Chapman, 2002, p.19). I decided to try both techniques throughout several lessons in my European Focus world history classes to find out which technique works best in my classroom for my students and myself.

Ben set out to inquire about cooperative learning as an alternative to the lecture approach he commonly used. Evident of his defensiveness or lack of openness in the teacher research process, Ben wrote, “I have been told time and time again that the days of lecture and discussion are over.” He echoed this sentiment in our one-on-one interview as he recounted how he came up with his question of study:

That was a tough decision. I was thinking of doing freshman transition but the one I picked was lecture. Because all of the literature we read [in the M.Ed.] seemed to be opposite of my teaching style. And I always felt teachers are good at one thing and if you try other things that you are not comfortable with it will not come off as genuine. That’s why I did it...if it really did turn out bad then I would have tried to switch. But I thought, “hey if it’s not broken”...

For Ben his research did not grow out of a sense that his students were not learning or that he needed to improve his practice. Rather, he was sensitive to the implicit critiques of his “teaching style” that he read about in his course work. He set out to prove “the literature we read” wrong. He asks “hey if it’s not broken...” why change it?

Tom also asked the question of whether he needed to change his teaching style in the teacher research process. He is also a white male and has been teaching in the same social studies department as Ben for 12 years. Tom serves as the advisor for several student clubs. Prior to receiving his M.Ed. he also completed his National Board Certification. Originally, Tom received a degree in Psychology but, he eventually became a history teacher. Like Ben he consistently used lecture but, was interested in looking at collaborative learning in his history class. He explained the origins of his teacher research project in his final research report. He prefaced his research question with a discussion of how successful his teaching style had been in the past. He wrote:

I have been teaching Advanced Placement United States History at [school name deleted] for six years. I have always seen it as my primary responsibility to prepare my students for the A.P. exam they are required to take during the first week in May. This gives me approximately 160 out of the 180 school days to teach all of U.S. History from early exploration to the present while giving 2 day essay and multiple choice tests on each unit. In order to “cover” all of the material, I have resorted primarily to a lecture, discussion format with very little individual or collaborative work done during class time. This has been very effective as students seem to like the class, do very well on the A.P. exam (75+% make 3’s or better), and generally give very positive comments about the class and my lecture method of teaching on end of the year, anonymous evaluations. In spite of student success on the exam, and their positive feedback, I wondered if altering my pedagogical methods would improve the class and student performance. Would it deepen student interest, engagement and understanding of history? The M.Ed. program’s emphasis on differentiation, web inquiry projects, and digital history, made me think it may be beneficial to change my methods from a teacher directed lecture class to more student centered, collaborative and inquiry oriented pedagogy.

Tom, like Ben, felt that his teaching strategy of lecture worked for him and his students. He reported his success in the past to prepare his students for the AP exam through lecture. Yet, he felt an implicit critique from the “M.Ed. program’s emphasis on

differentiation, web inquiry projects, and digital history” that led him to create a teacher research project related to collaborative learning.

The third teacher in this group, Bridgett, is a white, female who had been teaching for more than 20 years at the time of the study. She teaches middle school history—primarily North Carolina history – and works as a mentor for new teachers and department head in her school. Bridgett also studied cooperative learning, but unlike Ben and Tom, Bridgett described her project as originating from her prior experiences using cooperative learning in her middle school social studies classes. In her final research report she explained that cooperative learning had been a part of her professional philosophy over fourteen years. She wrote:

Throughout these fourteen years, my professional philosophy has been that my students benefit from cooperative learning experiences and that their retention of the knowledge gained through their own active learning efforts is greater than their retention would have been from a traditional lesson of teacher lecture. As a result of this philosophy, for this research project, I decided to take a closer look at one of my extended cooperative learning activities in order to determine how learning is affected when students prepare chapter lessons in cooperative learning groups and then teach those lessons to their peers. I wanted to analyze the effects of learning for both the “student teacher” and for the “student learner.” Thus, my research question became, “How is learning affected when students prepare chapter lessons in cooperative learning groups and then teach those lessons to their peers?”

From the beginning, Bridgett was clear about her expectation that her students’ learning would be positively affected by cooperative learning. Later in her research report she explained, “My assumption—my expectation—was that both the ‘student-teachers’ and the ‘student-learners’ were doing their part to be prepared for the chapter tests.”

## **Practical Theory**

Further support of Ben, Tom, and Bridgett's relative position on the practical end of the critical inquiry continuum was their use of practical educational theory. Table 6 lists the texts they cited in their final teacher research report bibliographies. These texts dealt with pedagogical issues and practical teaching and learning theories, not critical issues such as race, class, or gender and do not overtly promote democratic practices in the classroom.

Table 6

*Practical Teacher Research that Resulted in Little Classroom Change: Final Research Report Bibliographies*

Teacher	Topic	Text(s) from final research report bibliographies
Ben	Cooperative learning	Bransford, J., et al. (2003). <i>How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School</i> . Washington, DC: National Academy Press.  Gregory, G. and Chapman, G. (2002). <i>Differentiated Instructional Strategies</i> . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Tom	Collaborative learning and inquiry based learning	Steeves, K. (2002). Working together to strengthen history teaching in secondary schools. The American Historical Association.  Sexias, P. (1993). The community of inquiry as a basis for knowledge and learning: The case of history. <i>The American Educational Research Journal</i> , 23, 305-324.  Sexias, P. (1998). Student teachers thinking historically. <i>Theory and Research in Social Education</i> , 26, 310-

		314.  Henry, M. (1991). Advanced Placements United States History. <i>Social Studies</i> , 82, 94-97.
Bridgett	Cooperative learning and student comprehension	<i>Cooperative learning</i> . (2004). Kennesaw State University Educational Technology Training Center. Retrieved Feb. 07, 2005, from: <a href="http://edtech.kennesaw.edu/intech/cooperativelearning.htm">http://edtech.kennesaw.edu/intech/cooperativelearning.htm</a> .  Johnson, R. T. and Johnson, D. W. (2005). <i>Cooperative learning</i> . The Cooperative Learning Center at The University of Minnesota. Retrieved: Feb. 07, 2005, from <a href="http://www.cooperation.org/pages/cl.html">http://www.cooperation.org/pages/cl.html</a> .  Stahl, R. J. (1994). <i>The essential elements of cooperative learning in the classroom</i> . ERIC Digest, ED370881.

These practical texts inspired their studies. Ben, Tom, and Bridgett used them in designing the “test” lessons or learning activities in their studies. The texts also helped in articulating the phenomenon they observed during the teacher research process. In the process, Ben, Tom, and Bridgett dialogued with the “experts” in an effort to fulfill the purposes of their studies. This led them to develop a greater sense of efficacy in their teaching. This related to the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry; the development of efficacy was social change that resulted from the teacher research process.

Both of the texts Ben cited also served as core course texts in two of his previous M.Ed. classes, EDUC 293B *Ways of Knowing* and EDUC 194B *Teaching and Differentiation*, respectively. At the outset of his project, he described his impression that the “experts” all tout cooperative groups as the “way of the future.” In his final research report he wrote:

Cooperative learning groups are the way of the future. They say that students enjoy learning in this format and that they retain more information and develop higher level thinking skills with this technique, as students are using their own personal learning strengths and creativity. (Gregory-Chapman, 19) [Ben included this citation].

In order to compare cooperative groups with his usual lecture method, Ben wrote, “For my research, I chose a lesson that I felt would be conducive for cooperative learning and mixed auditory and kinesthetic learning (Gregory & Chapman, 2002).” The learning theory and teaching strategies presented in the text *Differentiated Instruction Strategies* served as a core piece of what he wanted to examine and he used this text to create the “test” lesson. He outlined this cooperative learning activity in his final research report:

The lesson I started with was a look at the two city-states of Ancient Sparta and Athens. Students had to split into two groups to research and find answers about their respective city-states that I gave them. They had to fill out an outline of questions that I gave them. They had to complete the outline and use it to teach a member from the opposing city-state about their culture. As they learned about life in their cities, they were to begin demonstrating those characteristics in their discussion. For example, in Athens, a sense of community developed where the citizens could talk freely and interact to solve problems. In Sparta, the society was patriarchal where women were separated from the men and allowed no voice in decision making.

Ben created the “mixed auditory and kinesthetic learning” activity for his students based on his reading of Gregory and Chapman (2002). The students were expected to talk and act like members of a Greek city state.

In his final research report he wrote about how in the Athens group, a student said, “Role playing is stupid.” He wrote:

I intervened and asked them to tell me what they learned about the freedom and independence that existed in Athens. The students were able to quote verbatim from the textbook but had no idea how it could be applied to their group nor did they see any flaws or any problems their form of government would have on society. This was interesting as one of things the experts say that students like about cooperative learning is the

ability to have choice within the topic and work from open-ended questions so the students can explore the topic (Gregory & Chapman, [2002], p. 118).

Ben felt that Gregory & Chapman were misguided. These “experts” wrote that students like cooperative learning because they “have choice within the topic.” Yet, Ben did not see his students taking the opportunity provided in the role play activity to go beyond their textbook information.

Tom referred to the practically oriented educational texts in his teacher research final report. Like Ben he referenced them to indicate his awareness of what the “experts” were saying about lecture as a teaching and learning activity. He wrote:

Research indicates that lecture is not the most effective method of teaching diverse learners. To be effective, lectures must be combined with active discussion and exercises that involve the use of primary sources and historical analysis. On the contrary, research also found that cooperative learning methods are very difficult to implement with high schools that are concerned with high SAT scores and college admissions (Steves, 2002). My overriding research question is: How frequently should I incorporate inquiry learning lessons and [cooperative] projects in my AP classes?

Tom acknowledged the point and counter-point regarding lecture as an effective teaching tool. Evident of his dialogue with the experts, Tom questioned whether the use of inquiry will help his students pass their AP exam. He wrote:

In other words, will the students actually learn and understand the material in 160 days if the lessons are more inquiry and self directed? Will they really understand the concepts and make connections between events if I do not teach it in a narrative lecture format? Peter Sexias states, “if students are given too little opportunity for active interpretive participation in a classroom community of inquiry, their formal history lessons may not connect at all with their formal, naïve sense of the past, in which their history education is entirely ineffective” (Sexias, 1993, p. 320). But the question remains, will they be able to pass the test?

Tom’s reference to Sexias demonstrated his awareness of research related to inquiry learning but, he still questioned whether this research provided realistic suggestions given

the time constraints of an AP course. His teacher research project gave him space to prove for himself whether the proponents of inquiry-based learning were right.

From the beginning of her project Bridgett acknowledged:

Throughout these fourteen years, my professional philosophy has been that my students benefit from cooperative learning experiences and that their retention of the knowledge gained through their own active learning efforts is greater than their retention would have been from a traditional lesson of teacher lecture.

In her teacher research she wanted to determine whether her students' learning was positively affected by cooperative learning. As such she went to the "experts" to help her create a unit of study for her students. In her final research report Bridgett wrote:

For cooperative learning to be an effective teaching tool, experts emphasize that "teachers should begin planning by describing precisely what students are expected to learn and be able to do on their own well beyond the end of the group task and curriculum unit...teachers should describe in very unambiguous language the specific knowledge and abilities students are to acquire and then demonstrate on their own" (Stahl, 1994, p.1). Therefore, to make certain that my students understood both their group and individual responsibilities, I gave them detailed, specific directions, which I explained before I assigned the group members and made the chapter assignments.

After explaining to her students the assignment and individual responsibilities, Bridgett allowed her students to work in their cooperative groups and plan to "teach" their classmates some aspect of the unit. Returning again to the experts, Bridgett left the homework assignments each day up to the students' discretion:

Cooperative learning experts point out, "It is not sufficient for teachers to select outcome objectives; students must perceive these objectives as their own. They must come to comprehend and accept that everyone in the group needs to master the common set of information and/or skills" (Stahl, 1994, p. 2). Therefore, to encourage student involvement and commitment, I left it up to each group to generate what homework the members would have during the planning days.

Despite following the "experts" advice in designing the cooperative group assignment



Bridgett was dismayed at the end of the unit when the students did poorly. Trying to make sense of the poor student outcomes, Bridgett looked to her data. She reported, “At one point in my notes, I had jotted down this comment, ‘Students don’t understand the full concept of cooperative learning groups.’” Returning again to the experts, Bridgett wrote in her final research report:

Cooperative learning experts stress that “[S]ocial skills for effective cooperative work do not magically appear when cooperative lessons are employed. Instead, social skills must be taught to students just as purposefully and precisely as academic skills. Leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills empower students to manage both teamwork and task work successfully.” (Johnson, 2005, p. 2). A very valuable early-in-the-school-year lesson could be teaching these cooperative learning social skills, and then re-enforcing these skills each time students are assigned both short and long term collaborative group work. Pursuing this idea into next school year would make an ideal follow-up teacher research project!

The teachers’ use of outside educational research in their teacher research is demonstrative of the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry. Ben, Tom, and Bridgett engaged in conversation with the “experts” by questioning educational theory and testing it out in their own classrooms. The teacher research process put them on equal footing with outside educational researchers and provided a space to challenge the hegemony of “outsider knowledge” in their M.Ed. experience. Teacher research resulted in an improvement in the teachers’ sense of efficacy and affirmed the decisions they typically made in their classrooms. This was particularly evident in the impact of the teacher research on the teachers discussed below.

### **Impact on Teachers**

The teacher research experience impacted Ben, Tom, and Bridgett but not to the same extent that it did the other teachers in the social studies cohort. The data these three teachers collected affirmed their pre-conceptions. While their practice was not dramatically changed, they experienced some positive, unexpected changes as a result of their research.

Ben exhibited little growth or change in “craft knowledge” over the course of the teacher research. He wrote in his final research report that the project “validated” his practices by providing him with “student data:”

This project has given me some concrete validation for my performance in the classroom. My style is effective. Each teacher has their own particular strength when they are teaching their students. Students are astute enough to realize quickly when a teacher does not have confidence in the lesson they are presenting and when a teacher is comfortable and confident. As a teacher, we must be true to ourselves and how we function best in the classroom. Good teachers should not change wholesale their practices just because some experts feel those techniques, like lecture-discussion, are outdated. As a result, I am going to continue to do what I do best and feel comfortable with. Now that I have the backup of student data to prove that this method can be and is successful, I can stop wondering if what the experts say is best for students can be applied in every classroom. A good teacher realizes their strengths and when and where to apply them. For me, it is to continue to write important terms on my board or overhead and continue to lecture.

Ben’s inquiry into classroom practices resulted in little change. He felt validated as a “good teacher” and planned to “continue to write important terms on my board or overhead and continue to lecture.” His pedagogical beliefs were further entrenched.

In addition to data from the students to “backup” Ben’s beliefs about his skill at lecture, he gained affirmation from his colleagues’ comments. During our one-on-one interview he said:

They [other teachers in his department] use cooperative learning and they are very, very good at it. So I wanted to sit and listen to them and watch

them do their lessons and help me plan my lessons. And they came in to observe me and try to make sure it was flowing and working. And I just wanted to see what they thought and it was very weird having them come in and they were like, “I could not stand up there and do what you do and come up with the examples off the cuff so I have to use cooperative learning because it helps me manage the classroom.” So that was kind of another neat aspect that was validating what was going on.

Again he found data to support his original contention that lecture works best for him and his students. Ben reported that, rather than need to incorporate cooperative learning to help “manage the classroom” like his colleagues did, his ability to “come up with examples off the cuff” meant that his lecture-style was working.

One result of Ben’s project that was transformative was his interaction with his fellow teachers. In our one-on-one interview Ben admitted his nervousness about allowing his colleagues come into his room to observe. He said:

I felt kind of like, oh my God, here I am [Ben], a veteran, I am always running my mouth about something, “this really sucks.” I was kind of nervous at first. I was paying too much attention but, we finally got used to it. And my students kind of picked up on it. They were like, ‘should we do this because Mr. Smith is in here?’ ‘No, don’t worry about.’ And Heather taught next door and she was my student teacher and so it was kind of like a complete role reversal. And her lessons are just fantastic – her cooperative learning lessons. So it was kind of weird. No one really comes in here and then I had a panel of teachers. But it worked.

By asking a variety of teachers to observe his classes Ben received feedback on his practice. For instance, Ben wrote:

I asked John to come in and observe the lesson. He liked the lesson and had some good feedback: ‘high level of engagement for freshman and lively discussion going on showing evidence of prior preparation’ This was a good lesson, and I felt pleased with the progress of the students as I moved about the room.

Admittedly feedback from colleagues as cited above also helped to validate the status quo in Ben’s classroom and led him to think it was not “broken.” Yet, Ben not only was observed but observed his fellow teachers. In doing this he demonstrated an interest in

critical inquiry by at least seeking to observe alternatives to the lecture mode. He wrote in his final research report:

To help me throughout the process, I enlisted the help of two teachers who use cooperative learning as the primary teaching method in their classrooms. John is an English teacher and Jim is a fellow social studies teacher. I observed several of their classes before planning my own lessons to get a firsthand look at some of the objectives for their lessons and how they are accomplished in order to cover their curriculums according to the Department of Public Instruction models. My goal was not to emulate what they do but find out how cooperative learning is planned and executed as the primary instructional method from teachers who are comfortable with and have mastered the practice. I also sat down with them to help me plan my initial lessons. As I moved forward in the process, they came in several times to do informal observations and critiques of my lessons and my execution of them. I also interviewed them as to why they chose to use cooperative learning and what they felt the pros and cons of using the technique were. I also asked the same questions to Heather, another social studies teacher who also uses cooperative learning. I asked Heather in order to get a third opinion and because she was not personally involved with the research, like John and Jim.

By attending his colleagues' classes and having them observe his teaching, Ben made himself vulnerable and open to critique. In the end this collegial interaction led to only very little in Ben's classroom practice. He maintained his belief that lecture "worked" for him and his students but he reported in our interview that in the future he will include one or two group projects – "an Odyssey scavenger hunt" and "children's books on the Civil War."

Tom found little reason to change his teaching practices as a result of his teacher research project. Like Ben, Tom felt validated in continuing his practice of lecturing to his students. He wrote in his final research report, "This research validated my belief that I am an effective teacher when I lecture because most students stated that they learned from my presentations and found them to be generally engaging." Despite finding that his students, "enjoyed these projects, were highly engaged, and deepened their

understanding” and that their projects were “excellent,” Tom nonetheless remained convinced of his original belief that lecture “was the most effective method.” He admitted to some “disappointment” in the lack of “fun and creativity” in his classroom but, he saw no alternative. Tom finished his teacher research project with little change in his “craft knowledge” about how effective teaching and learning occurs in an AP US history classroom. In our interview he said that he felt like it would be really “cool” to create projects in which students worked on their own, while he walked around and guided them. But he said, “I don’t think it is going to work,” mainly because he felt that his research demonstrated that, “[Teachers] Can’t expect students to do history because they [the students] don’t care.”

Although Tom’s teacher research project made little long-term change in the way he taught AP United States history, he reported that he was eager to continue his inquiry into his classroom practices the following year. Inspired by his experiences as a teacher researcher, Tom wrote about his disposition for future study in his final research report. He wrote:

Next year I hope to continue what I began in this action research in several areas. After AP exams are over this year, I would like to have students answer another survey that specifically asks for them to evaluate my lecture method of teaching. Hopefully this will provide me with information that I can use to determine what makes a good lecture and then improve what I already do. I also plan to talk with my colleagues to get help fine tuning these projects so when I assign them next year they will be more time efficient and thorough. Finally I want to continue to challenge myself by continuing to try new techniques and to improve my pedagogy.

Tom wanted to continue his teacher research in the subsequent years in order to refine his lectures, improve what he already does, and “challenge” himself to try new things. This desire for future study indicated that Tom was open to future inquiry after conducting his

teacher research. He expressed similar sentiments in our interview. Again he commented that, “It [teacher research] validated what I do” but, he insisted that at the same time, “It didn’t take away from that [inquiry projects].” He decided to do inquiry projects again in subsequent years with students but with the caveat that “we [teachers] need to explain this stuff [history] to students.” As a result he wished to explore ways to improve his lectures for the students that don’t have the appropriate background knowledge and the “vast majority” that don’t have an interest in history.

As a result of her study Bridgett made some minor changes to her teaching practices but did not alter her original philosophy regarding cooperative learning. Midway through the teacher research project she gave her students a test and was disappointed by their poor performance. In her research report she described:

However, most students did not perform well on the first test. Alarmingly, the low test grades were not exclusively made by the “student-learners”; too many of the students who had researched, studied, planned, and taught the lessons on those first three chapters did not fair any better! To find out what had happened I asked students to respond to questions concerning how they had prepared for the lessons and how they had reviewed for the test.

As a result of the students’ poor performance and their responses on the questionnaire, Bridgett made some adjustments in her teaching for the remainder of the teacher research project. These changes included giving the students a summary of the chapter, and only giving tests to students who missed the “teaching” portion of the assignment. Reflecting in her final research report, Bridgett wrote “My teacher research has led to additional questions about cooperative learning as a teaching strategy.” She followed this up by stating, “I still believe that cooperative learning is an effective teaching technique with

remarkable benefits for students.” Her questions that resulted during the teacher research process focused on assessment. She wrote:

However, since this is the first time I have tested my students following the chapter lessons, I now question, “Does a test on these chapters really reveal how much students learn from their cooperative learning groups and from the other teaching groups? Would a different form of assessment, such as an essay test or a reflective writing assignment, be a better tool for measuring what students learned from both experiences?”

Here Bridgett explored alternatives to her teaching practice and wondered about better ways to assess their learning. This move toward more critical inquiry was shallow since in the very next sentence she determined that the “success” of the cooperative learning had less to do with her practices and more to do with her kids.

She wrote:

From a different angle, here is a question that I have, which is based on other experiences during this school year, “Is it just this group of students?” Too often they have been less motivated to meet expectations than previous years’ students. On more than one occasion, I have had to re-evaluate the expectations I have for this group’s accomplishments and have had to lessen my requirements in order for the majority of students to meet them. Yet, at the end of the second grading period in which this unit of study occurred, 50 percent of my students had earned an A or B! This group is indeed a paradox.

In our one-on-one interview Bridgett echoed similar sentiments about her students. She wished that she had had the previous year’s group of students (which included many ESL students) since they would be more “fruitful” for study. She also discussed her students’ lack of work ethic and initiative. In comparing her project to that of other members of her cohort she felt that their projects had a different type of results than hers since they dealt with “sub-groups” of students. She described her project as dealing with a practical teaching strategy she had used before, “which was fine,” yet she seemed disappointed in the results.

Like Tom, Bridgett appeared eager to pursue her line of inquiry further in subsequent years. In engaging in her teacher research she dialogued with “experts” and tested out their advice in her own classroom. While her classroom practices and teaching philosophy may not have changed dramatically, her relationship to the experts did. No longer a passive consumer of “outsider knowledge” Bridgett developed her own “insider knowledge” through teacher research and, in the process, altered her own theoretical understanding of cooperative learning.

Although the teacher researchers in the first group did not engage in critical inquiry to the same extent as their peers in the social studies cohort, they still are situated on the continuum critical inquiry. All three of the teachers experienced some transformation through the process and therefore pursued critical inquiry. Ben, Tom, and Bridgett entered into democratic dialogue with the “experts.” This was an emancipatory experience for them as they confronted an implicit critique on their practice present in the literature. As a result they developed a stronger sense of their efficacy as effective teachers. Despite this aspect of critical inquiry present in their teacher research, they are considered the least critical group within the social studies cohort since their research resulted in little social change for their students. In considering the implications of their research, the teachers did not value or emphasize the democratic changes experienced by their marginalized students in the teacher research process.

### **Impact on Students**

Demonstrative of their relative location on the continuum of critical inquiry, Ben, Tom, and Bridgett all reported very few positive impacts of their research on their



students. In collecting student data, they did not focus on their marginalized students and tended to give positive student impacts less emphasis than cases when the intervention negatively affected some of their students. In cases where they found evidence of social change for their students, they pointed out that these occurred only for a minority proportion of their classes. Across the three projects, the teachers did not find value in their students working together – a characteristic of a democratic classroom. In the end all three felt that the data they gained from their students demonstrated that their traditional teaching strategies worked the best.

Ben like other teacher researchers in the social studies cohort used a variety of student data to make his conclusions. In his final research report he wrote, “From looking at test scores, student performance within activities, surveys, and interviews I conclude that the lecture-discussion format produces better grades in my classroom.” In order to give more evidence of why he felt that the “lecture-discussion format” was more effective he described in more detail a collaborative group project on the Renaissance that was a “total bomb.” In his final research report he concluded:

This project [on the Renaissance] was a total bomb. Thirty percent of the groups did an outstanding job, fulfilling my goals and objectives. The other seventy percent were disappointing. Groups put forth little passion and effort, sticking to the textbook and Internet sources only and not using any of the other research materials available. When I asked one student why she was just sitting there, she responded, "Oh am I supposed to find out what he did on my own?" Every student was given a rubric and instructions on the objectives of the lesson. Most stuck to printed out resources, did not rehearse their presentations and could not announce the words on the paper they were reading directly from, something they were told not to do. As a result, many students received poor grades on their projects and recorded their lowest test grades of the research period at 62% AND 67%. What really amazed me is that since we are a grade-driven high school, they asked me to go back and re-teach the lesson because they knew they had done a poor job, " Because they did not know how to do it".

Ben concluded based on the data he collected during and after the Renaissance unit that, for the majority of his students, his implementation of cooperative group activities had a negative impact on the majority of his students. He reported that their test scores went down and the students asked to be re-taught the material.

Ben acknowledged his marginalized students but did not study the impact of his teacher research project on them directly. In describing his classes in his final research report Ben provided a laundry list of the demographics of students in his freshman world history classes. He wrote:

I teach three classes of freshman world history with a European Focus. While I conducted the same lessons with all three classes, the ones that I focused on for my action research are my fifth and sixth period European Focus World History classes. Fifth period is composed of fifteen females and ten males. Twenty-four students are Caucasian and one student, a female, is from Mexico. Three other students are from outside the US. Two are males from Denmark and Ireland and one female from Germany. Six of my students have individual education plans (IEP'S) for attention deficit disorder or specific learning disabilities in reading and writing. Sixth period is composed of twelve females and eighteen male students. Twenty-eight students are Caucasian. I have one African American male and One Latin American student, who is a female. I also have two students who are from different countries and are in their first school experience in the US. One student is a female from Germany, and the second student is a male from Australia. Eight students in this class have IEP's ranging from English as a Second Language, acute depression, dyslexia, to specific learning disabilities in reading and writing and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder.

Despite this initial discussion of the varied needs of his students, he never studied in more detail the impact of his teacher research on the various sub-groups. The only mention of marginalized students in his project came when Ben wrote that, "I then decided that I would interview six students from each class: three males and three females - two high grade achieving students, two in the middle, and two with low grades from each class."

Despite choosing a cross section of successful and less successful students, he did not indicate what the interview responses were specifically for each sub -group. Instead he describes their combined responses. For instance he wrote, “Nine of the twelve students said they viewed group work as a time to relax; it adds some variety to the routine of school.”

Ben provided evidence that for at least some of his students cooperative learning was a favorable alternative to his typical “lecture-discussion” teaching mode. Despite this data, he still felt that his traditional teaching style was most effective the majority of the time. He wrote in his final research report:

Responses from student surveys asking about learning style and preference, and the benefits of lecture vs. cooperative learning activities were tallied. Nearly 80 % of the students in the two classes combined said they favored direct instruction. The reasons they stated followed the same pattern " Some people slacking could ruin the whole thing", or "Unless the teacher stands over us, it can get out of hand as some people talk about other subjects" and "Conflicts in opinions can take away time from learning". However, from the 20% that responded in favor of group activities, many of their comments were in complete contrast to what their peers had said. I feel they include good reasons for me to keep trying to incorporate this instructional method in certain areas of my curriculum.

So, at least for some of his students (he reported 20%) their responses towards group activities were so favorable that he felt it gave “good reasons” to incorporate cooperative activities into his classes. In his final reflection Ben indicates how he intends to do this in the future. He wrote in his final research report:

This research process has forced me to use some of the different techniques and ideas that we have learned throughout the M.Ed. process. I have always felt that each teacher develops their own strengths and nurturing that strength is what allows them to be successful without falling into a rut. This process has allowed me to quit wondering if what I was doing in the classroom is good and valid. It put it to a test where I was ready to accept the outcome and work on a wholesale change if need be to help my students maximize their achievement. I learned that what I am

doing is OK, and I should continue to keep it going. That being said, some good things did happen during some of the group activities. There were some really good lessons where both the students and myself worked hard to facilitate and complete them. Many of them, especially the Black Death lesson, I am going to keep and refine to use again next year. Also I am going to work with Joe to form some cross-curricular lessons. We are thinking about doing a unit with World War I as his students are reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*. I can provide the historical content and background. Then our classes can do some group extension activities so I can work along with Jason to get a better feel and understanding as how to create and use cooperative learning exercises

In the end Ben was clear that cooperative group lessons would only occur a couple of times a year.

Echoing Ben's analysis of student data, Tom wrote in his final research report that, "Most students do not want any major changes in the way I teach AP US history." He wrote this despite presenting evidence of the favorable impact of a project on labor unions for his students. In his final research report he described:

Both the presenters and their classmates appeared engaged and interested throughout most of the process. This was demonstrated by a sampling of comments made by students as they were presenting. Isabella, "Can I slow down? This is really, really interesting." Sam, "25 different languages spoken at union meetings, can you imagine that?" Julie, "The story of the Ludlow was emotionally gripping." Finally after discussing the Pullman Strike, Kristine stated, "this is not cut and dry." I also had a conference in which a parent brought up the project stating, "The project was great. I could hear the girls in the other room discussion and arguing over the importance of events. It was really exciting and they are learning a great life skill by working in groups." It was obvious that the students' research and presentations increased their depth of understanding about the topics and most were engaged in the work. Many students' comments in the post project reflection supported this conclusion.

Tom wrote about the positive impact the project on labor unions had on his students by providing individual comments that demonstrated how excited and engaged his students were. He also included a parent's comments on the positive impact. In his own reflections Tom wrote, "It was obvious to me that many students were highly engaged,

increased their depth of understanding, improved social and research skills and made relevant connections, but my question remains as to whether it is an efficient use of AP class time.” He felt that the social skills his students developed and their democratic interactions had little overall value to him and his research. Despite the positive impact of the project on his students’ engagement, understanding, and skills, Tom still felt concerned that it was not an “efficient way” to teach the AP curriculum.

To introduce his class in his final research report Tom wrote:

66% of students ranked [in a survey] their feeling of engagement with the class and subject matter high to very high. Maybe inquiry will reach the other 34%. 87% ranked class enjoyment as high or very high. On their level of learning, 79% ranked it high or very high although a related question on level of success (on test scores) had 36% high, 40% medium, and 22% low.

Tom acknowledged a disparity in his students’ feelings of engagement and their levels of perceived success. He wrote that the inquiry oriented projects may “reach the other 34%.” He later provided evidence that these projects appeared to have “reached” these kids. He wrote about the slave narrative project:

Two girls researched the use of quilts as signs on the Underground Railroad and created a slave quilt with hidden messages. Matt who surprised me with a beautiful poem stated, “I was really moved by stories about slave children.” Tre, an African American male said, “it took the facts and statistics and made it real” and “Many slaves held their heads up high and had faith in God.”

Later, in the interviews with a “cross section of seven students with grade ranges of A to D-” Tom interviewed a typically unsuccessful student to see how she felt about the project on slavery. He reported, “All expect one female enjoyed the project and found it interesting. She has a D in my class, doesn’t like school and was upset that her group was not creative. She did however say that the slave narrative project was awesome because

it was more creative.” Despite evidence that demonstrated a large minority of Tom’s students felt disaffected and unsuccessful but became engaged in the inquiry projects, he concluded that his traditional lecture approach was the most effective method of teaching for his students. He wrote in his final research report:

I asked specifically [in interviews] if they liked my lecture, found them relevant and if they helped their understanding since almost all of the material could be found in the text. I assumed my top students would find my lectures irrelevant because of their high levels of reading and comprehension but every student commented that my lectures were usually interesting, efficient, and made the material much easier to understand. Even my top student said, “I really need your lectures to understand the big picture.”

The comments of his “top student” align more closely with Tom’s final conclusions than those of his marginalized students. In analyzing his data, he emphasized the value of *his* speech in the classroom over that of his students talking to each other.

Tom reflected on the impact of his implementation of cooperative, inquiry assignments at the end of his final research report when he wrote:

The student responses after completion of the two separate inquiry projects which required different levels of complexity, research time, and effort, indicated that while inquiry projects are beneficial, lecture is still the most effective method of learning A.P.U.S. history in the time allotted. These results were evident in all three surveys the students answered, in class comments, the reflection papers, and most vividly in the interviews with seven students. It is obvious that students really enjoyed these projects, were highly engaged, and deepened their understanding about a specific topic, but they consistently stated that my lectures were more effective and necessary to understand the big picture. It was interesting that if grades and time were not an issue most thought inquiry would be better. In answer to my overriding question about the frequency of using inquiry learning, I will incorporate them at least once a semester.

Although Tom found evidence through his teacher research project that, “students really enjoyed these projects, were highly engaged, and deepened their understanding about a specific topic,” he concluded that he could only incorporate them “at least once a

semester.” In answering his overriding question, he believed that cooperative inquiry projects negatively impacted students’ “grades and time.” This prevented him from justifying using cooperative projects any more frequently.

Unlike Ben and Tom, Bridgett frequently used cooperative learning with her students. In her teacher research she wanted to discern this teaching strategy’s impact on her student learning. In order to do so, she measured their test scores after completing a cooperative group assignment in which the students acted as “student teachers” and taught their classmates, “student-learners” about the American colonies. Disappointed in their low scores, Bridgett wrote in her final research report:

My assumption—my expectation—was that both the “student-teachers” and the “student-learners” were doing their part to be prepared for the chapter tests. However, most students did not perform well on the first test. Alarming, the low test grades were not exclusively made by the “student-learners”; too many of the students who had researched, studied, planned, and taught the lessons on those first three chapters did not fair any better! To find out what had happened I asked students to respond to questions concerning how they had prepared for the lessons and how they had reviewed for the test. One question I asked was, “Did you read each chapter completely, including reading and studying the Section Assessments and Chapter Assessments?” From their answers I began to get an idea of what was happening:

Breanna: “No. Because there were some days when I would forget and just not do it.”

Caroline: “No, I read the chapters but not always completely and I looked over the section assessment but did not study it.”

Kevin: “For the pre-required reading I did not thoroughly read the sections. I did look at it and skim. If I saw something interesting, I read further.”

Andre: (who made the highest grade on the test in his class): Yes, but sometimes I did not finish reading the chapter. I would almost finish just about every time.”

Laura: “No, I did however read in class to follow along.”

Curtis: “Yes, I did read all the chapters, but the first time I read the chapters, I missed some important things in the little boxes or captions under pictures.”

The student answers were remarkably similar. If they did read the chapters, they had not taken time to go over the chapter assessments.

Most admitted that either they did not read the chapters at all or they had skimmed only parts of the chapters.

Bridgett concluded based on her students' feedback that they did not learn the content because they had not read the chapters at home simultaneous to the cooperative group work. Despite her disappointment with her students' lack of success she tried a different approach to answering her research question. She wrote:

However, had I really answered any aspect of my research question from this experience? I decided to analyze how well students had done on specific questions on the test from their assigned chapter. I chose to focus on two students who taught the same chapter but in different classes—Caroline, who is a consistent A/B student, and Andre, who has an IEP and is generally a C/B student. Because of each one's previous history in my class, I believed they would be good representations of how well both high achieving and average achieving students had done in preparing and teaching and learning the same chapter.

Here, Bridgett chose two different types of students to inform her understanding of the impact of cooperative learning on student achievement.

Although she did not focus on a marginalized student in the course of her research, she did look more closely at Andre who she considered to be an “average achieving student.” She pondered the impact of his experiences with cooperative learning in her final research report. She wrote,

How was Andre's learning affected by the cooperative learning and teaching experience? He commented to me that he felt confident in his knowledge about his chapter because he had spent so much time on it. Both in and out of class, he had done additional Internet research on the featured colonies and had been in charge of preparing a word search game that included information from each of the colonies, not just on one. Because he scored 16 out of 17 on the first test, I also felt confident that he had gained knowledge as a result of his role in the cooperative learning group. However, Andre's comments on his reflection weren't too helpful in my gaining insight into his experience. He mainly commented about what he had learned from the chapter rather than what he had learned from the experience. He did say more than one time that he had not realized how difficult it is to be a teacher. One comment he wrote in his



evaluation, "...a teacher has a hard time...trying to get rady (sic) for class for just one hour." led me to believe that Andre's group had spent a great deal of time—including time out of class—to prepare their lessons. Caroline had mentioned that her group had had too much teaching time. In contrast, Andre felt his group could have used more time—a sign of a group being well prepared.

Importantly, Andre, a usually B/C student got the best grade in the class on the test following the cooperative learning assignment. Despite this improvement, Bridgett wrote, "However, Andre's comments on his reflection weren't too helpful in my gaining insight into his experience." She was dissatisfied with making a correlation between Andre's experiences in cooperative groups with his success on the test. This may be due to Andre's response on a final reflection assignment that he would not like to repeat the activity. Taking this in mind Bridgett wrote:

I look forward to trying this cooperative learning assignment in the future, applying some of the adjustments that I have contemplated as a result of my teacher research. When I asked my students on the final reflection whether they would or would not like to do another cooperative learning activity of this magnitude, 75 percent indicated that they would like to repeat the activity. Both Caroline and Andre were part of the 25 percent who said they would not want to do the activity again. However, I believe that by prefacing the project with lessons on cooperative learning social skills and by adjusting my procedures with assignments and in assessing what students have learned, even Caroline and Andre would be open to a second chance to be part of a cooperative learning experience.

While Bridgett got mixed reviews from her students about the impact of cooperative learning on their achievement, she nonetheless felt that she would continue it in the future. Importantly, Bridgett made some allowances about how she could improve on her already common use of cooperative learning in the future by "prefacing the project" and scaffolding the procedures and assignments for her students.

All three of the teachers in the first group concluded that they were comfortable with their approach to social studies teaching despite students' contrary data. In cases

where the students were positively impacted by the integration of an alternative teaching strategy, the teacher researchers only made minimal concessions to use the strategy in the future. The failure to acknowledge the needs of their marginalized students limited the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry. Ben, Tom, and Bridgett all underemphasized democratic conversation between students when they analyzed their data and drew conclusions. Their students experienced little social change as a result of their research.

### **Section Summary**

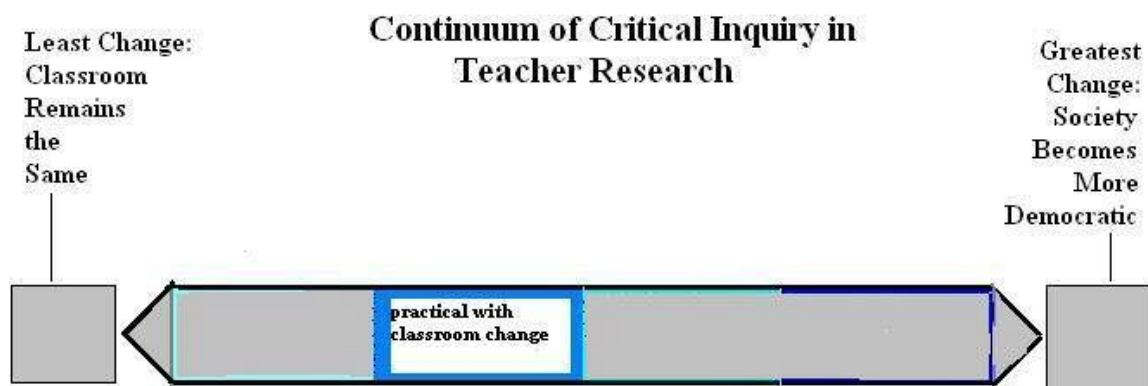
The first group of teacher researchers made up of Bridgett, Ben, and Tom engaged in critical inquiry to some extent through the teacher research experience. They experienced emancipation as they tested out the theories of educational “experts.” At the same time these teachers looked to their colleagues for help in the teacher research process. By making the study of their teaching a collaborative effort, they challenged the isolating one teacher, on classroom model of education. Their research resulted in very little change in their teaching styles practice since their interpretation of the data collected affirmed their previous practices. Their research was also limited in its impact on their students and the culture of their classrooms since these teachers did not equally consider their marginalized students in their studies. The consideration of marginalized students by seeking more democratic practices and, eventually emancipation, is characteristic of more critical inquiry and is situated farther to the right on the continuum. The next group of teachers demonstrated movement toward the right end of the continuum.

### **Practical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom Change**

Compared to the last group of teacher researchers, the teachers described below appeared to move along the continuum towards more critical inquiry through teacher research. Figure 4 illustrates their position relative to the continuum of critical inquiry. These teachers studied pedagogical issues in their classroom and as a result demonstrated change in their teaching practice and “craft knowledge.” Unlike the previous group they demonstrated greater openness to try alternatives to practices they already employed in the classroom. They also demonstrated more critical inquiry in their consideration of marginalized students in their classrooms. They prompted their students into dialogue and as, a result, changed the social dynamic of their classrooms. Their research led to democratization which changed the culture of their classrooms. For both the teacher researchers and their students, in this group, practical inquiry was emancipatory.

Figure 4

*Position of Practical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom Change*



## Practical Research Questions

While all of the teachers in this group studied their pedagogical practice through teacher research there were some slight differences in the focus of their studies. Zach and Kim explored specific teaching tools – political cartoons and i-Movies respectively. Mark, Tyler, and Mandy experimented with different pedagogical philosophies – discovery learning, improving student effort, and multiple intelligences respectively. Amy and Jim explored alternatives to school policy on plagiarism and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), respectively. Their teacher research questions and topics are described in their own words in Table 7. Note that although the topics range widely, they all focus on some practical issue in their classrooms.

Table 7

*Practical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom Change: Research Topics and Questions*

Teacher	Topic	Research Topic or Questions
Zach	Political cartoons	“First of all, I wanted to determine how well my students could find and understand symbols that are used in political cartoons. Secondly, I hoped to find if my students were recognizing a cartoonist’s bias while examining cartoons. Lastly, I wanted to discover if the cartoons were helping my students make connections to news events that were headlines on the evening news.”
Kim	i-Movies and AP US history	“So, for my action research project I set out to discover a way to connect students to history through the computer. I assigned students the task of creating a documentary on an aspect of the Civil War.”
Mark	Using a variety of historical sources to improve student engagement	“I wanted to know why [my students found history to be their most boring subject].” “Frankly, why can’t history be full of writing and self-expression, hands-on discovery, and gratifying experience?”

Tyler	Connection between perceived effort and success	“Do students make connections between effort and success on tests? What happens when students make strong connections between effort and success? What skills do students need to achieve effective effort and thereby improve their test scores?”
Mandy	Lessons based on multiple intelligences	“What happens to student learning in an AP class when I incorporate other subjects and lessons centered on the Multiple Intelligences to enhance student learning beyond the traditional lecture and daily discussion?”
Amy	Plagiarism	“Since I continue to encounter plagiarized passages and papers, I decided that I needed to research methods to incorporate into my classroom that will prevent students from unintentionally plagiarizing.”
Jim	Modifications for exceptional children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)	“Which modifications are valid? Which ones, in my opinion, do not work and hinder student’s progress?”

Despite the differences in their projects, all of the teachers in this group pursued critical inquiry to such a similar extent as to warrant their relative proximity on the continuum. Evidence of the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry included their openness to exploring alternative classroom practices -- they questioned the traditional in their social studies classrooms – and the resulting social change that occurred. Their research led to democratization in the classroom that carried practical implications for their students’ learning and their teaching. Below I describe in more detail the practical educational theory used, the questions the teachers asked, and the results of their studies in order to demonstrate the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry.

### **Practical Theory**

Some teachers in this group like the previous used practical educational theory to frame their teacher research projects. Table 8 lists the texts that the teachers included in their final research report bibliographies. These texts deal with practical, pedagogical issues and not social or cultural issues.

Table 8

*Practical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom Change: Final Research Report Bibliographies*

Teacher	Topic	Text(s)
Zach	Political cartoons	McKenzie, W. (2004). Use editorial cartoons to teach about past and present. Retrieved Apr 10, 2005, from <a href="http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr210.shtml">http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr210.shtml</a> .  Ostrom, R. An active learning strategy for using cartoons and an Internet research assignment to integrate current events into international studies courses. Retrieved Apr 10, 2005, from <a href="http://www.isanet.org/noarchive/ostrom.html">http://www.isanet.org/noarchive/ostrom.html</a> .
Kim	i-Movies and AP US history	Bransford, J. Brown, A., and Cocking, R, eds. (1999). <i>How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school</i> . Washington, DC: National Academy Press.  Buzzell, J. and Metaxas, V. (1999). A woman's place is in the curriculum K-12: A multicultural approach. <i>Transformations: A resource for curriculum transformation and scholarship</i> , 10, 69-77.
Mark	Using a variety of historical sources to improve student engagement	None cited

Tyler	Connection between perceived effort and success	MacLean, M. & Mohr, M. (1999). <i>Teacher-Researchers at work</i> . Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.  Stiggins, R. (1997). <i>Student-involved classroom assessment</i> . Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall.
Mandy	Lessons based on multiple intelligences	Bransford, J. et al.. (1999). <i>How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school</i> . Washington, DC: National Academy Press.  Gregory, G. & Chapman, C. (2002). <i>Differentiated instructional strategies</i> . Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.  Heathcox, D. (2002). <i>Differentiated instruction in the classroom</i> . Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.  Hopkinson, D. (1993). <i>Sweet Clara and the freedom quilt</i> . NY: Dragonfly Books.  MacLean, M. & Mohr, M. (1999). <i>Teacher-Researchers at work</i> . Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.
Amy	Plagiarism	McCabe, D. (1999). Academic dishonesty among high school students. <i>Adolescence</i> , 34.  Roig, M. (1997). Can undergraduate students determine whether text has been plagiarized? <i>Psychological Record</i> , 47, 113-123.
Jim	Modifications for exceptional children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)	None cited.

The practical educational theories presented in these texts inspired the teacher researcher projects in this group. They formed the basis of the interventions that they used and also helped the teachers articulate the phenomenon they observed in the teacher research process.

In the next sections, I divide the group of teachers that make up, “teacher research that led to classroom change” into sub-groups based on the topics of their projects. These sub-groups include the teachers who studied pedagogical strategies, philosophies of social studies teaching and learning, and administrative policies. In each case, I describe the impact of the teacher research on the teachers and their students. By pointing out the practical nature of the questions the teachers asked, their willingness to explore alternatives in the classroom, and the social implications of their research, I support their position on the continuum of critical inquiry relative to the other members of the social studies cohort.

### **Pedagogical Strategies**

The openness with which Zach and Kim approached their teacher research is indicative of the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry. Both committed to pursuing alternative teaching practices in their classroom in an effort to improve their students’ learning. In this way their research impacted both their students and their own “craft knowledge” or working knowledge of effective teaching for student learning. Rather than maintain the status quo, they actively sought change in their teaching.

Zach is a white male who had been teaching middle school social studies for eight years at the time of the study. Over time he had developed a close relationship with the local university and often worked with student teachers. In our interview he said that he decided to get his Master’s degree as a way of “Being in on what is going on in different schools and learning different things to try.” In an exit assignment for the program, Zach wrote, “I decided to start the M.Ed. program because I was looking for a new challenge,



as my teaching seemed to be on cruise control.” According to Zach, his teacher research project grew out of practical classroom need – how to teach his middle school students about current events. He described his “struggle” in his final research report:

During the past few years I have struggled with how I should begin class each day. I have used various warm up activities that got the students settled, but I have always questioned their value beyond simply getting class started quickly. I have also handled the study of current events in a way that has never felt very effective to me. Having my students share summaries of articles has never felt like a good use of time, and other assignments that I’ve given involving current events, such as following a story for several days, or examining a current event from several different newspapers, always took too much time away from the curriculum.

In an effort to help his students understand current events without taking up extra much of his class time, Zach began to experiment with using political cartoons in his sixth grade classroom. Over several months (around six), Zach systematically collected data , including student work and class notes, related to how effective his use of political cartoons was for student learning. Here he described his major concerns in the final research report:

First of all, I wanted to determine how well my students could find and understand symbols that are used in political cartoons. Secondly, I hoped to find if my students were recognizing a cartoonist’s bias while examining cartoons. Lastly, I wanted to discover if the cartoons were helping my students make connections to news events that were in the headlines and on the evening news.

In asking his research questions, Zach demonstrated openness to a new approach to teaching current events - the use of political cartoons. He wanted to determine if this method of teaching current events was really working for his students so, Zach committed to using them daily for a period of about sixth months. Over this time he worked hard to collect student work and get their feedback. Central to answering his questions was not only determining if his students were learning but also whether more of

his students were making connections and participating in class. In February Zach began to interview his students to learn more about their experiences. He purposely chose students from a variety of ability levels.

Kim, like Zach committed to using a new pedagogical tool in her classroom; she used i-Movie and MovieMaker in her AP (AP) United States history classroom for three weeks – a period spanning her unit on the Civil War. She is a white female and had been teaching for eight years, like Zach, at the time of this study. She received her National Board’s certification the year of her enrollment in the M.Ed. program. In an exit assignment for the program Kim was asked why she started the M.Ed. program. She wrote that the 10% raise motivated her along with the opportunity to “return to the college setting and grow as a teacher.” She wrote also that she “felt like I was stuck in a rut with my teaching. I hope that getting my master’s degree would revitalize me for the profession.” Kim served on her school’s technology committee and used PowerPoint regularly in her classroom. Previously she had only used i-Movies in her AP classes but only after the final year exam. Interested in determining whether this type of multi-media project could help students learn history, Kim decided to use i-Movies as the central theme of her teacher research project. She wrote in her final research report:

So for my action research project I set out to discover a way to connect students to history through the computer. I assigned the students the task of creating a documentary on an aspect of the Civil War. The students picked a topic, researched it, and then created a five minute documentary using either i-Movies or Windows Movie Maker. The goal of the project was to incorporate technology as a way to increase student engagement as well as learning about the Civil War.

In order to examine whether the documentary project on the Civil War increased “student engagement” and learning, Kim, like Zach, gave her students surveys to complete,

examined the students' final projects, and interviewed selected students. As a result of their research, both Kim and Zach reported a difference in their classrooms as a result of the alternative teaching tool they had used. Their research impacted both their students learning and their own "craft knowledge."

### *Impact on Teachers*

Both Zach and Kim described how their teacher research led to new understandings about their students and the methods they use to teach social studies. This change in their "craft knowledge" came about through their inquiry into alternative teaching practices. In his final research report Zach noted:

Throughout the course of this study I have learned a lot about my students and myself. I have come to realize that conducting research does not have to involve years of study or big questions that affect all educators. Others may read my research, and perhaps some will decide to follow my practice, but I did this research for myself and I have become a better teacher because of it. It has taught me that I can question what I do in the classroom, and through various methods, I can discover if I am being effective.

Kim also developed a new realization about how she could measure her effectiveness as a teacher. In particular she discovered that, "the use of primary source documents to complete the script for the documentary made the war come alive to the students in a way that my simply telling them about it could never do." For Kim this led her to consider a new role for herself in the classroom – from that of a lecturer that "tells" students about history to a "facilitator" of their understanding. In her final research report she reflected on what she had learned over the course of the teacher research and its impact on her:

Overall the documentary project has made a big impact on me as a teacher in several ways. First, and the thing I value the most, was that I really got to know my students better. The weeks we spent completing the documentaries were a time I really got to talk and reflect with my students about history. They were eager to share their perspectives on things and I feel we created a special bond. Often in class someone will still bring up something that happened during the weeks we were working on this project. For the students I think they feel more bonded with me because they did something creative, something they really put their best effort into. They got to show me a different side of themselves and that has made a big difference in the atmosphere of the class. Students now ask more questions and make more comments in class. I feel less like a teacher and more like a facilitator. This has led me to the conclusion that all students need a creative outlet for learning. If not documentaries, than some other type of project where the students feel their work is relevant and also feel engaged. I think if more teachers would do things like this there would be a great impact on student learning and I am guessing a decrease in student behavior problems because students would feel engaged and connected to their own learning.

Like Zach, Kim wrote about the value of getting to “know my students better” over the course of her teacher research. She also described what she learned from her students – that students feel more “engaged and connected” when they had a “creative outlet for learning.” As a result she felt that more teachers should act like facilitators in their classrooms.

The impact of the teacher research on both Zach and Kim and their students is indicative of the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry. Rather than maintain the status quo, they discovered alternative teaching practices that effectively enhanced their students’ understanding of the social studies. As a result their own “craft knowledge” was impacted -- their inquiry led to new understandings about teaching social studies.

### *Impact on Students*

As a result of both Zach and Kim's inquiry into alternative pedagogical practices, their classrooms changed. Rather than maintain the status quo, their engagement in teacher research led them to pursue new avenues in their teaching. As a result their students also had access to new learning experiences. In their final research reports both Zach and Kim reflected on the impact of their studies on their students.

In order to answer his research questions, Zach interviewed a group of twenty students to understand in more depth what his other data told him. In his final research report he quantified what the interviews told him about the impact of his use of political cartoons for his students:

Interviewing twenty students gave me a clear picture of what my students thought about the political cartoons and it helped clarify the trends that I found in the written responses. As far as recognizing symbols, eighteen of the students claimed it has become easier, and fifteen of these cited specific symbols that we have seen in cartoons this year. Bias has become more recognizable to most of these students, as seventeen students said that they felt that they could usually tell how the cartoonist felt about the issue. However, six students pointed out that when they weren't aware of the subject or topic, the bias was hard to notice. Nineteen of the students that I interviewed believe that they are more informed of current events than in previous years.

His students reported a marked improvement in their ability to not only "read" political cartoons but also in understanding current events. In reflecting on the results of the interviews, Zach wrote about the marked level of improvement in student discussion that has come from his use of political cartoons. He wrote:

The findings that I have thus far indicate to me that I should continue with political cartoon warm up activities each year. I enjoy the discussions that come from the cartoons, and that is enough to make me keep them as a part of my lessons. Every time we discuss a political cartoon I am surprised with the comments and opinions that I hear. Sometimes a student that I did not expect to have a strong opinion will share a thoughtful answer, and sometimes a cartoon that I thought would only

provide a few similar comments will open the gates to a long discussion of an issue that has many sides.

It appears from his research report that his students had become engaged in learning about current events and were eager to discuss their opinions. Further evidence of the impact of his teacher research on students, Zach pointed to the benefits of using political cartoons especially among his marginalized students. He explained the changes he observed in one of his quieter students over the course of his teacher research study, “Jonathan was fairly quiet during the beginning of the year, and would only share his answers if called upon, but now he shares his answers almost every time.” The same was true for other students. In our interview Zach linked his students’ willingness to speak with their improved understanding of current events. He said:

There are still certain students who are more willing to speak. They always are – it just their personality. But, I don’t see any of the hesitation, like they are scared to speak up or scared to be wrong...It [the use of political cartoons] brings up good points. There are some students who are way more into it than others but, I think that most are involved and write. And most days they are going to have something to say.

According to Zach, even his more successful students were impacted by his use of political cartoons. He wrote:

Lisa claimed that she could almost always connect the cartoons to the current event “because my family talks about the news constantly.” Lisa then added, “I tell my parents about a lot of the cartoons since they are usually about things that my parents are talking about. They like to hear my opinions and they like to hear what the rest of the class says when we have discussions.”

For Lisa, then, the political cartoons led to more meaningful conversations about current events not only with her classmates but with her parents.

Kim’s students were also positively impacted by her teacher research. She took note in her final research report about the effect of the i-Movie assignment on her

students and their learning. She wrote, “Students were engaged because they saw the project as meaningful, relevant, and fun.” Perhaps most exciting about her project, Kim reported in our interview, that she uncovered students learning things about the Civil War which they “didn’t even know they were learning.” Evident of this was an i-Movie project completed by two students, Elizabeth and Laura, on “destroyed relationships during the [Civil War].” In her final research report, Kim reflected on the way the two students learned not only factual information creating their i-Movie but also larger life lessons. Kim wrote:

Their documentary featured three different ‘couples’ who found themselves torn apart by the ideology of the war. First, they focused on General Stonewall Jackson and his sister who were on opposite sides of the secession issue. Then they focused on two generals who were best friends and ended up fighting each other at the Battle of Gettysburg. The last relationship they touched on was a father and son who fought on opposite sides. When I interviewed Laura and asked her about what she had learned she listed a lot of factual information about these people and their role in the war but she learned something she failed to mention. It is clear that she and Elizabeth learned a broader concept of how people are affected by war and how it can have a personal impact on people’s lives. It is interesting that Laura did not touch more on this idea of conceptual knowledge when I interviewed her because on her survey she comments, “[doing the documentary] definitely made the Civil War seem less detached from today. Our topic put the war in perspective.”

For these students Kim’s teacher research project led to a rich learning experience that changed their perspectives on the subject they studied. Not only did Laura learn about famous generals and battles of the Civil War but, she came to a deeper conceptual understanding of the war. Over and over again, Kim reported similar student experiences like those of Elizabeth and Laura; her students were deeply impacted by what they learned and this translated into a better understanding of history. She wrote, “Other

students expressed how amazed they were at the depth of their understanding about their chosen aspect of the Civil War.”

### *Summary*

Indicative of the extent to which Zach and Kim pursued critical inquiry, is the extent which their classrooms changed over the course of their teacher research. Rather than maintain the status quo, their engagement in teacher research led them to pursue alternative teaching tools. In their final research reports Zach and Kim reflected on the impact of their inquiry on their own understanding of teaching social studies. For Zach and Kim and their students, the teacher research experience was emancipatory. It provided space for the teachers to become “students” of their students and allowed for the development of more democratic relationships. It also provided the opportunity for their students to take on new roles in the classroom. By being a part of the teacher research process, students gained an opportunity to effect change in their classroom experiences. As a result their students were impacted – they learned through new experiences and developed more nuanced understandings of social studies.

### **Social Studies Philosophies**

Mark, Tyler, and Mandy chose to focus on broader ideas about teaching social studies rather than on discrete teaching tools. Nonetheless they pursued critical inquiry in their projects to a similar extent as Zach and Kim. Like the teachers above, these three changed their classrooms over the course of their teacher research. By being open to change through teacher research, both they and their students benefited. In the process,



they came to new understandings about their students and ways to better meet their needs. By being more in touch with their students, the teachers brought about social change in their classroom. The teachers were concerned with individual student needs, worked to understand their marginalized students, and created a more democratic culture in their classrooms.

Mark has more than 5 years teaching experience, notably, during his tenure, he taught an African American history course and was involved in a program for at-risk males at his school. He wrote about his experiences in the M.Ed. in the exit assignment, “When I originally considered joining the program, I was looking for a way to enhance my social studies pedagogy as well as strengthen the foundations of my historical knowledge. The desire to return to the classroom as a student also played a major role in my starting the M.Ed.” Importantly he also reported that in the program “I rediscovered my passion for revolutionary education.”

Mark’s teacher research project grew from his realization that he had gotten away from his “revolutionary” or “radical” approach to teaching social studies. In his one-on-one interview he explained, “I also find every once in awhile, I think around March, I look at my own teaching and realize that I am falling into bad habits. It’s the same old droning on and on, memorizing things, not really studying history the way historians study it.” Eager to revitalize his teaching and make his subject more interesting to his students Mark decided to use his teacher research project to examine alternatives to the “same old droning on and on.” He wrote in his final research report:

I considered my own teaching practices. Did I assign some types of activities and readings more often than others? How often were my students truly engaged by the history? What kinds of activities do the students find most interesting and engaging? What kinds of activities

were the most off-putting or boring? Was there one pedagogical solution for all of the students, or did different students respond in different ways? I began my research, then, probing these and other questions that pierced the very heart of my instructional practices.

In order to answer his questions about assignments and activities, Mark went first to his students and asked them what they thought about history. They unequivocally reported that history was “boring.” Mark reflected on their response in his final research report. He wrote:

I wanted to know why. I asked them, what makes English, science, and math so much more interesting to middle school students than history? The kids liked English for several reasons: some told me that they liked the writing and expression, some enjoyed reading, while others found the discussions to be interesting. Most of the students said that the hands-on nature of science labs made science fun, and most admitted that math was a necessary evil which was often difficult, but sometimes gratifying. And that is where I started this research. Upon reflection and inquiry, I found that few if any history teachers, including myself, actually made history interesting with engaging activities and the frequent use of engaging sources.

Mark also asked the other history teachers at his school to see how they felt about their teaching:

I questioned each of the social studies teachers at my school (two per grade), and each admitted that although they loved history in college, few of them had the time or the resources to teach history the way they experienced history. Most of them longed to perform original historical research, and all of them said they would welcome new methods of teaching their curricula.

Faced with disillusionment on the part of both his students and his colleagues, Mark set out to inquire into alternative approaches to teaching history. He wrote:

Ultimately I came up with a research question that went to the heart of my interest: How do different types of historical sources (poetry, music, art) affect student engagement and attitude toward history? I wanted to discover what topics and activities kids found interesting, but I also wanted to examine how I could integrate those interests into my curriculum.

In asking his question about different types of historical sources, Mark demonstrated his openness to critically and systematically inquire about what “kids found interesting.”

While he begins his research with some hunches about what type of activities students would like most, he nonetheless, was willing to try a variety of techniques.

Tyler similarly was open to hearing what his students had to say as he tackled an issue of practical importance in his teacher research. This allowed for Tyler’s classroom to become more democratic. He felt open to following his teacher research wherever it led him and his students because he was eager to see a change in the way his students related their effort with their success (or lack thereof).

He is a white male with eight years of experience. After graduating from college with a Bachelor’s degree in history and a teaching license, he first went to law school. After deciding that a career in law wasn’t for him, Tyler became a classroom teacher. He completed his National Board certification, coached wrestling and taught a variety of courses including one he had developed on military history while in the M.Ed. program. When asked why he decided to get an M.Ed. Tyler wrote that, “The 10% raise for the degree was enticing in and of itself, however, the opportunity to pursue the degree with the level of convenience granted by a distance learning program and to do so with other teachers were the best selling points.”

According to Tyler it took him a while to choose a teacher research question. Eventually he decided to examine the connection between student effort and success on tests. He wrote in his final research report:

My action research project investigated and analyzed students’ ideas and practices related to effort and success. The eventual goal was to help students identify and put into practice academic skills that would be

effective in helping them to achieve their academic goals. My guiding research questions were: Do students make connections between effort and success on tests? What happens when students make strong connections between effort and success? What skills do students need to achieve effective effort and thereby improve their test scores?

I decided to pursue an analysis of student effort and success because I have consistently witnessed parents and teachers blame student failure on a lack of student effort. Furthermore, my experiences in teaching high school revealed to me that students did not always relate high levels of effort to high levels of success.

Tyler felt his students had no clear conception of the connection between the work they did preparing for his tests and the grades they received. He complained about their “negative attitude” and its impact on “student motivation.” Tyler believed that if he could change the way his students perceived effort they might be more successful in his history classes. His inquiry focused on determining different ways to help his students based on the feedback he received from his students. He was open to what his students had to say.

Mandy also wanted to learn more about her students and to help more of them feel connected to social studies through her teacher research. She is a white female who taught with Tyler and had six years of experience. She also completed her National Board Certification while she was enrolled in the M.Ed. program. Mandy wrote in her exit assignment, “First and foremost, [it] was the challenge of continuing my education. I had heard of the program the year before and was very interested in it.” She also cited the raise and friendly competition with Tyler as one motivating factor for entering the program.

In our interview she described her interest in the notion of differentiation but disappointed with the lack of theory related to differentiating in advanced classes. She said:

Probably most of it came from the differentiation class. She [the instructor] talked a lot about Multiple Intelligences and that seemed to fit with the AP curriculum more than the other differentiation stuff she was talking about. So I just focused a lot on that instead of on low level, mid level and high level. The Multiple Intelligences worked better and it just kind of sprouted from that.

Along with the work she did in the course on differentiation, Mandy also mentioned a desire to find an alternative to her normal mode of “lecturing everyday.” She said, “I just wanted to change it up a bit.” Like Mark and Tyler, Mandy was eager to take advantage of the teacher research project to “change it up a bit” and diverge from the status quo in her classes. Their candidness about seeking change points to the extent to which all three of these teachers pursued critical inquiry. Although their research questions focused on practical classroom issues, their research was critical. It led to social change in their classrooms, democratization, and emancipation. The relationship between Mark, Tyler, and Mandy and their students became more democratic. This led to changes not only in practice but also in the ways classroom decisions were made. This was emancipatory for both students and teachers. Teachers, while acknowledging practical theory, made decisions about practice based on their own research and student input. The teachers studied the needs of marginalized students and all of their students had the opportunity to change their classroom experiences by taking part in the research process.

### *Impact on Teachers*

The manner in which the teachers pursued critical inquiry changed their ideas about teaching and learning or “craft knowledge.” Mark was fairly succinct in describing how his research impacted his teaching. First, he wrote that based primarily on his students’ feedback he used more primary sources in his teaching. He explained:

First, I now teach history like people study history: I start the kids off with a broad secondary source, let them narrow down to a specific interest and then pursue that interest with a variety of primary sources. A different approach I also employ is when I start with a primary source, get the students interested and involved in a specific facet of the history, and then fill in the gaps at the end with the secondary source.

Also, due to the variety of responses to the different media he supplied to his students, Mark also changed his traditional lessons to include more variety. He wrote, “Second, I have begun to integrate a greater variety of historical sources into my teaching instead of simply using written ones.” His inquiry led him to change the way he would teach in the future in order to help more of his students succeed in their study of history.

Tyler learned more about his students and how to help them be more successful, especially related to their perceptions about the relationships between effort and success. He reflected on the process and how it challenged his assumptions in his final research report:

This process also challenged my assumptions of student effort and how to improve it by giving me a better understanding of why students make certain decisions about their effort. For instance, my initial assumptions did not always prove true; my research project did not immediately yield higher grades and effort and my students’ effort was also greatly influenced by factors outside of our class. However, the research process did encourage students change their perceptions of learning and discovered that they were open to making those changes.

Important for Tyler, through his inquiry he uncovered, what he described as, “important gender differences.” He wrote:

Moreover, my action research revealed that important gender differences exist in terms of how students put forth effort and how accurately they self-assess. As a result, I revised my vision of what success in this project meant, and both my students and I were able to discover unexpected answers and to act on them to improve the quality of learning in our classroom. Stiggins defines success as “continuous improvement” (Stiggins 47). And by that standard, my action research was a success, both in terms of student learning and pedagogical practice.

Tyler summed up the impact of teacher research for him and Mark and Mandy when he wrote, “my action research was a success both in terms of student learning and pedagogical practice.” All three learned a great deal to enhance their pedagogical practice or “craft knowledge” while also changing the way their students experienced social studies. Through their openness to exploring alternatives and willingness to listen to their students in their research, they pursued critical inquiry.

### *Impact on Students*

The teacher research experience led the teachers to develop more democratic classrooms in which they changed their practice based on student feedback. Although originating from practical questions, their research led to social change. Mark, Tyler, and Mandy became more responsive to the needs of their marginalized students. They became “students” of their students when they talked with their students about teaching and learning. As a result, their classroom practices changed and, at the same time, the culture of their classrooms became more democratic.

According to Mark, he saw the most dramatic results during his unit on the Harlem Renaissance – a unit in which he set up four stations for his students related to the era’s poetry, music, and art. He wrote:

After going through all the data and looking for patterns, I came up with the following major findings. For the most part, the students responded favorably to the different sources. Most students admitted that history need not be boring, and that they had some real interest in the topics being explored.

Mark shared several stories in his final research report about how his students reacted to the multi-media lesson. For instance, he described Sierra and her experience learning

about the artwork of the Harlem Renaissance. Mark was impressed by her insight as she interpreted the work. He wrote:

Sierra was not as drawn to the poetry as Laurie, but she did find it interesting. She read the requisite four poems, but admitted that she was “not really a fan of poetry.” Of the four stations, she most enjoyed the art station. I had noticed that she had spent a period and a half looking at the different paintings, soaking them all in and considering the different styles. I asked her about the art in the interview, and she got excited. She insisted that we go over to the art wall and talk about different works. “This one,” she said, “is one of my favorites.” She pointed to the Romare Bearden picture. “I think it’s so alive. And the collage style is so cool. Look at the drummer and all the musicians! And did you notice how much blue is in it? Do you think it has to do with the Blues?” “Yeah, probably,” I said, amazed. “What else did you like?” “I liked this one a lot, too.” She pointed to Paul Colin’s *Nude Dancer on Piano*. “Most of the scene is imagination. You can see how much fun they’re having, but the shapes are unclear or they’re just lines. But you can see all the people dancing in the background, just from the lines!”

Sierra was clearly drawn to the art work that she studied in Mark’s class and it impacted her understanding of the Harlem Renaissance. By providing alternatives to the textbook, Mark helped her to both experience success and enjoyment in her learning. The same was true for his student, Ben, who was not a typically successful student. He found the music of the Harlem Renaissance engaging. Mark wrote about their interview in his final research report:

I interviewed Ben last. He was not as interested in speaking with me as the other two were; his guard came down when I told him that it wouldn’t be part of his grade, and that he could have some candy. I asked him what he thought of the stations. “Boring,” he replied. After a pause, I asked him to go into more detail. “Art: boring. Poetry: boring. Textbook: boring as usual.” “What about the music?” I asked. “Not so bad. I mean, I don’t like jazz, but it’s better than reading from a textbook.” As expected, Ben’s written answers on his sheet were incomplete if completed at all. But our conversation about jazz was interesting, and I could tell that he was able to articulate some opinions about city life from the music.



Like Sierra, Ben developed an understanding of the Harlem Renaissance through Mark's innovative, multi-media lesson. Not interested in the textbook, poetry, or art, Ben did find the music of the era to be engaging. He clearly "got it" according to Mark's report. If Mark had not provided his students with alternatives to the traditional social studies lesson, the lesson would have been "boring as usual" for Ben.

Tyler in his research also set out to reach students that were not consistently successful in his classes. In order to inquire about the best method to accomplish this, Tyler began to give his students a series of surveys in which they created graphs and wrote about their effort. He explained his process in his final research report:

At the end of each test, students graphed their effort ratings and grades on comparative charts. All charts and tests were kept in individual student portfolios. I periodically changed the third question in the effort survey to ask, "What do you need to succeed?" Based on these answers, I progressively taught multiple study strategies that I believed would foster effective effort and incorporated them into class assignments. These included mnemonic devices, time management skills, literacy strategies and note-taking skills.

Based on his students' feedback, Tyler taught multiple study strategies. Although some of his students continued to feel that their "high effort" did little to change their "low grades," Tyler found that some students were becoming more efficient as a result of the study strategies they learned in his class. He wrote about this in his final research report:

Improved effort over time was a desired outcome of this research. One mitigating factor related to these findings is that some students actually became more efficient with their study strategies and thereby used less effort to meet their academic goals. Other statistics seem to verify this. For instance, only two students reported high effort and low grades whereas seven students reported low effort and high grades.

As a result of his teacher research some of Tyler's students internalized study strategies that helped them succeed. By being flexible and responsive to his students, Tyler offered guidance on new strategies for his students to use.

Mandy felt that she found mixed results from her teacher research – her students' achievement levels did not go up. Nonetheless, she did find some unexpected results which she explained in our interview:

Yes, it did not effect their achievement. I looked at all of their past test grades just to get an idea of how they did on the test. And everyone kind of did the same. And they made the same test grades and essay grades were the same. Their interest levels were up a lot higher, their actual achievement level was not effected. I think they were learning more but I guess it was more affectual than factual because we did a lot on the home front. We build the victory garden so, they actually had more experiential knowledge than practical.

Mandy was still quick to point out that although the achievement levels did not go up they also did not go down or have a negative effect on student learning. In order to understand how her use of "enhancement activities" based on the Multiple Intelligences impacted her students, she surveyed and interviewed them. Data from these two sources, which she described in her final research report, indicated to her that her students appreciated the opportunity to study history using a variety of sources and "that the students did in fact enjoy this unit much more than previous ones." Much like Mark's students, Mandy's each found something about the unit that appealed to them. For instance, Mandy mentioned one student in particular who thanked her for including math in her class. This student wrote, "I like that you included math. No one seems to want to do math around here – not even math teachers!" Another student told her in an interview, "Well you know 8 a.m. is really early. And sometimes, knowing we are coming in here to take notes makes it hard to stay awake. When you started putting us in

groups and letting us do our things on our own, that made me want to come to class.” In more general terms she described the impact for her students as “motivating” and “exciting.” She summarized in her final research report:

What I found is that the students were excited when they came to class. Students who were typically quiet were speaking up and offering their own opinions. Students who felt they were in a class that was too hard for them started feeling like they could master the material, which gave them a greater confidence in their own cognitive abilities. I gave the students “options to achieve success” (Gregory et al., 2002, p x). These enhancement activities, while they might not have increased student achievement, have increased students’ desire to learn. Through my surveys and interviews, I learned that students did not like have lecture every day. They enjoyed these lessons because they added variety to a difficult, fast paced class.

Again, much like Mark, Mandy found that by including alternatives from the typical textbook and lecture mode in her classroom, more of her students were participating and finding things that they were interested in and good at. As a result their understanding of history became more complex and they were motivated to come to class.

### *Summary*

Mark, Tyler, and Mandy studied practical teaching strategies in their teacher research. Mark wanted to find ways to make social studies less boring, Tyler wanted to help his students succeed on tests, and Mandy wanted to meet the multiple learning needs of her advanced students. As a result of their teacher research, all three pursued critical inquiry that resulted in social change. Overall their practical teacher research was emancipatory in that it changed the roles of the teachers and students in the classroom. Mark, Tyler, and Mandy’s practical teacher research created democratic dialogue in their

classrooms. They became more responsive to their students, especially marginalized ones, and their students found the opportunity to offer feedback.

### **Administrative Policies**

The third sub-group pursued critical inquiry related to school policy. As a result of their research, they came to new understandings about their roles as teachers. Unique for these two teacher researchers, Amy and Jim also came to new conclusions about the way their schools treated students. Their practical research led to social change and democratization both within the classroom and in the school community.

Amy is a white female who had been teaching for seven years. She taught in an overcrowded, urban high school. In her exit assignment for the program, Amy wrote that she pursued an M.Ed. because “I wanted an opportunity to improve as a teacher.” She also reported that she liked the program’s aim at working teachers and that she was a part of a cohort of social studies teachers. In the year after Amy graduated from the program she joined her school’s Freshman Academy as the world history teacher.

Amy’s project stemmed from her frustration over the rampant plagiarism she found in her classroom. She wrote in her final research report:

I discovered that many of my students plagiarized portions of their papers while a few plagiarized their entire paper. Each year, I have tried to implement new strategies to help students write their papers without plagiarizing but each year I continue to encounter plagiarism.

Amy used her teacher research project as a forum to discover ways to help her students stop unintentionally plagiarizing. In particular she tested various ways to teach students appropriate research and writing methods. In our interview she said:

It's something that every year you encounter and I am just trying to figure out...I guess it is just the challenge...I was just trying to figure out what it is I can do as a teacher to prevent it. Realizing that the intentional plagiarism is never going away – there is always going to be those students. And not really concerned about trying to stop them b/c as they get smarter, I get smarter. I catch a lot of them. But it is the students that do it unintentionally that need education. They need to understand what they are doing wrong. So, really looking at that as a teacher and how I can incorporate different strategies into world history to try to prevent unintentional plagiarism.

Amy framed the “different strategies” she would teach her students within a research paper she assigned. Within this larger assignment she led her students through various activities. These activities ranged from conducting research to writing a final paper and citing sources. An example of the way Amy went about implementing a new strategy, reflecting on it, and then making appropriate changes can be seen in the example below taken from her final research report.

I decided that the next step would be to assign my students a research paper and incorporate activities about plagiarism throughout the time they were working on it. Since a number of my students responded on the survey that they were unclear about the correct way to cite sources and create a work cited page, I created an activity to help them (*see Appendix B*). This activity was designed to make students find the correct way to cite different sources using MLA format. I thought students would remember the citations better if they investigated and found the correct way to cite the different sources themselves instead of just handing them a sheet with all of the information on it. I had students work in pairs using the wireless mobile lab in our classroom to fill out the worksheet. However, students got confused with all the different options on the designated websites and students wrote down different answers. To cut down on the confusion, the next day I created a handout that explained how to cite from a variety of sources (*see Appendix D*).

Her responsiveness to her students and her willingness to try alternative approaches was indicative of the extent to which she pursued critical inquiry – she was actively reflecting throughout her teacher research. When her students “got confused” she tried something new.

Jim was also willing to try alternative approaches during his teacher research. He is a white male who has been teaching in an affluent suburban school and has seven years experience teaching middle school social studies. In his exit assignment, he reported that he entered the M.Ed. program because it was “teacher-friendly” and he felt it would make him “more marketable” to other schools. Jim also wrote, “And there was a little bit of me that wanted to increase my skills as a teacher, but I certainly thought that I didn’t need much improvement at the time I started the program.”

Jim’s study focused on his students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

He wrote:

I selected this topic because it has been an issue that I have dealt with since I began my teaching career and I know that it is both a burden and a blessing to many other teachers as well. The underlining question is how can I help students with IEPs? How can I relate to them in ways that helpful to their learning process? Yet there are some practical questions that I have had that made me choose this topic like: Should certain modifications be used for certain students? Do they help these students or hinder their progress?

At the same time, Jim wrote that he felt the teacher research gave him an opportunity to also reflect on his “personal philosophy of teaching” along with the “strengths and flaws” in the system that identified students with learning disabilities and put modifications into place. He wrote:

A major function of this case study is to also analyze and reflect on my own personal philosophy of teaching. I understand that it requires me to reflect on my profession, this action-research caused me to learn about myself as well as my students, in hopes of understanding flaws or strengths in my style that may disrupt or enhance the learning process for these students. I also wanted to identify strengths and flaws within the system, not to expose the special education department, but to attempt to understand what makes these specialized teachers choose certain modifications for students.

In order to answer his research questions, Jim chose two of his students with IEPs to be the subject of his case study. He analyzed their work, conducted interviews with them, and looked at their cumulative folders. Jim also met with each of the student's caseworkers, their special education teachers, and their teachers in other regular education or "core" courses. He wrote in his final research report that, "I felt that I gained the most information for this case study through looking at specific student's cumulative folders and through interviews with both the students and with other teachers."

Both Amy and Jim asked practical questions in their teacher research projects. Amy was interested in stopping unintentional plagiarism and Jim wanted to change the modifications of his EC students. As a result of their practical teacher research, they pursued critical inquiry. This was evident in the impact of their projects on themselves and their students. The results of their teacher research were not limited to changing their practice, but also changed the culture of their classrooms. Amy and Jim allowed for democratic conversation with their students when they involved them in the research process. Responding to their student data, Amy and Jim changed their practice and also, sought to change the practice of their colleagues in their school. This was an emancipatory experience for Amy and Jim and their students. The teachers, by conducting their own educational research, became more in tune with their students needs. They also gathered data that allowed them to work for change within their departments and schools. Their students experienced a transition in their role in the classroom. In the teacher research process, their students got a chance to offer their opinions and change the classroom culture.

### *Impact on Teachers*

Amy and Jim also grew during the teacher research experience. Their understanding of their students became deeper and as a result their “craft knowledge” became more nuanced. Importantly both teachers shared their research findings with their colleagues in a hope that their work would change school policies.

As a result of her teacher research, Amy had to rethink her assumptions about student plagiarism. She wrote in her final research report:

Additionally, I learned that I need to challenge my assumptions. I was wrong in assuming that students plagiarized out of laziness as well as assuming that if students could define plagiarism that they knew how to avoid it. I know that plagiarism will never be eliminated from my classroom. There will always be students who wait to do their papers until the last moment and decide to buy a paper or cuts and pastes from internet sources. However, the majority of students who plagiarize do so out of ignorance. Simply assigning a zero will not solve the problem. Students need to be taught how to avoid plagiarism.

However, through the process of teacher research she was able to develop new strategies that effectively taught her students how to avoid plagiarism by properly planning their research and citing their sources. As a final step in her research she consulted her colleagues to find out their opinions about plagiarism. In her final research report she wrote:

As part of this research, I also asked my colleagues for input on how they teach or cover plagiarism in their classes (*see Appendix H*). All of my colleagues include a statement about plagiarism in their course information/syllabus at the beginning of the year. My colleagues all wrote that students plagiarize out of laziness or pressure, not a single person wrote that it was because of ignorance. Prior to my research, I believed that laziness was why students plagiarized too. My research has demonstrated the need for teachers in the social studies department to teach their students about plagiarism. As a faculty, we need to be consistent on how we teach our students about plagiarism and even our expectations for papers. All of my work with plagiarism will be for



naught if my colleagues contradict what I have taught my students. It would also be important to work with the English teachers too so that all of the information students receive about writing papers and plagiarism is consistent and reinforced throughout their four years in school.

Amy developed a new understanding of plagiarism over the course of her research compared to her colleagues' who still thought it had to do with student laziness. Armed with her research findings, Amy was convinced that she needed to educate her colleagues and convince them to develop a departmental plagiarism policy. When I followed up with her in our interview in the fall after she conducted her research Amy and her team had successfully *created* a plagiarism policy for teachers and students at her school to follow.

Jim's research also led him to question some of his colleagues' practices. As a result of his teacher research Jim determined that the "there needs to be a more rigorous procedure to identify what the direct needs of these students are and find a better way to help them achieve some progress in our classrooms without burdensome modifications that sometimes do not work." By talking to his students and learning about their academic histories, Jim realized that they often were given modifications that had less than a desirous effect and, in the case of Dennis the modification turned out to be detrimental - it embarrassed the student. As he reflected on his teacher research in our interview Jim described how he thought his research not only affected his students, but his own role as a teacher. He said:

With that project that was probably the first thing, although we had other projects throughout the M.Ed. program I felt like that's where I wasn't the typical classroom teacher who just receives students in the morning and then went home in the afternoon. I felt like getting into that kind of issue with the IEP's and looking at that and calling attention to the fact that I felt like some of these kids were being done an injustice by the way they wrote those things. That made me feel good. It wasn't that I was putting

someone down for not doing their job right. I had some sense of accomplishment. I felt like the kids are who need the help not so much the adults. But I felt like it ended up being helpful for the special education teachers who were writing those things b/c we talked about it after I wrote my project. I would probably agree with you that that was something that got me thinking about choosing an alternative path in education. There were some enticements like a brand new school and starting at the bottom up but, I would have to agree with that it was a big part of it.

Importantly the extent to which Jim pursued critical inquiry was not only evident in the impact his research had on his own “craft knowledge” and the experience of his students. Rather, he also shared his findings with the special education teachers at his school. His remarks from this interview also revealed that he believed his teacher research and the M.Ed. program in general led him to take a job at an intervention school working with high-risk students.

### *Impact on Students*

When I asked Amy in our interview whether she felt her students had progressed as a result of her work she said:

Some of them I think I did. I think the majority by the end of the school year understood what they needed to do. More so than what I had done before when I'd write on the papers that this is plagiarism, you need to do X,Y,&Z to fix this and then the next week I'd get the same thing. From paper to paper I actually saw changes.

More specifically in her final research report, Amy reported that her students demonstrated a better understating of plagiarism and wrote better research papers. She included some of her students' comments on whether they had a greater understanding of plagiarism in her final research report, this is an excerpt:

Many of the students with positive responses elaborated and the following are a selected few of their responses:

*-I learned “that you really have to summarize information that you find on the internet”*

- *“I get it a lot better”*
- *“it makes more sence [sic] now”*
- *“I now understand how to cite info that needs to be cited”*
- *“I learned that it is important to have a very specific structure to citing your sources”*
- *“I have a better understanding but it still seems complicated and hard”*

Not only did her students come to a better understanding of plagiarism but they also wrote better research reports, which Amy characterized as an “unintended benefit” of her teacher research. The extent to which she pursued critical inquiry can be seen in the impact of her inquiry on her students. As she tested alternative strategies with her students, they gained in their research skills.

Jim also impacted his students over the course of his teacher research. One story that stood out in his research report was about his student Anthony. According to Jim, Anthony was a black male who was “insecure” and “gives up easily.” In his final research report Jim described his interaction with Anthony:

Anthony also has grading as a modification, he was surprised when he learned that I was no longer curving his grades or using a ‘safety net’ grading system with him after I decided to inform him about my decision to try something different over a set period of time. When I showed him his interim report and informed him of his average, we both sat down and discussed whether or not he actually needed these modifications. Eventually a parent conference stemmed from this discussion and changes were made to his overall IEP which involved taking him out of a CA [curriculum assisted] class and into a regular education language class.

This dramatic scenario detailed how Jim’s willingness to try an alternative and then sit down to talk to his student led to changes in the student’s experiences with special education.

### *Summary*

In both Amy and Jim's cases the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry was evident in their openness to listen to their students and to seek alternatives to traditional practices in their classroom. As a result of their willingness to inquire systematically, their students' experiences in the classroom also changed. Both Amy and Jim asked practical questions in their teacher research projects. Amy wanted to stop unintentional plagiarism and Jim wanted to change the IEPs of his students. In the process of conducting practical teacher research, they pursued critical inquiry. The results of their teacher research changed their practice and also changed the culture of their classrooms. Amy and Jim involved their students in the teacher research process. This was a democratizing and emancipatory experience for Amy and Jim and their students. The teachers, by conducting their own educational research, became more in tune with their students needs. They also gathered data that allowed them to work for change within their departments and schools. Students were directly connected with the changes in teacher practice. Through the teacher research process, students were offered a space to offer their feedback and alter the classroom culture.

### **Section Summary**

Despite the differences in their projects, all of the seven teachers in the, "practical teacher research with classroom change" group pursued critical inquiry to a similar extent. This was clear in both their openness to exploring alternative classroom practices and the implications of their research. Their openness to change and willingness to engage in dialogue with their students brought about democratization. These teachers all changed the way their students experienced social studies, and in the process enhanced

their own understanding of teaching and learning. Their classrooms became more democratic places, as they became “students” of their students and listened and acted on student concerns. They became more in touch with their students’ needs and considered students who were not consistently successful in their classrooms. The practical teacher research experience was emancipatory for both the teacher researchers and their students in that it provided new space for interaction, growth, and change.

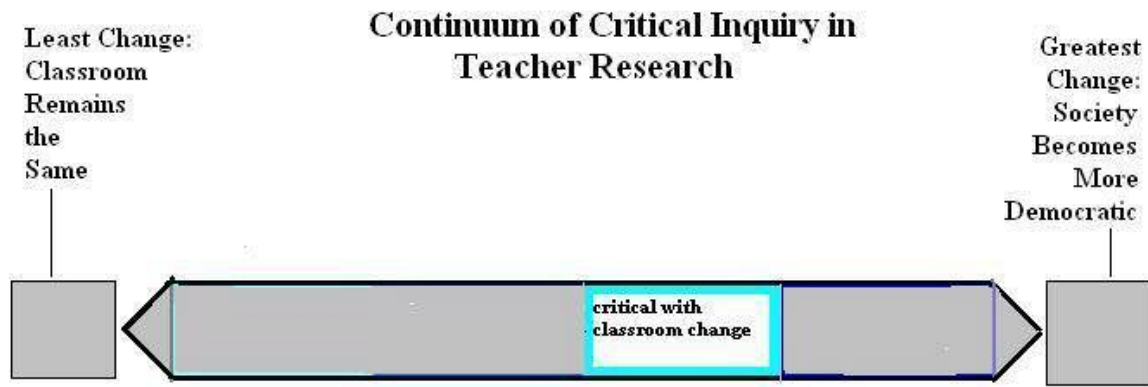
### **Critical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom Change**

The next group of teacher researchers on the continuum, Dan and Mary, pursued critical teacher research that resulted in classroom change. Their teacher research focused on both pedagogical and social issues. They demonstrated openness and responsiveness to their students and changed in their classroom practices. Unlike the previous two groups of teachers their projects also set out to critically inquire about the impact of social and cultural issues on their students. Critical theory inspired their projects and led these teachers to not only consider their marginalized students in their studies but, to also work to make their classrooms more democratic places. They pursued critical inquiry to a greater extent through their study of practical *and* cultural issues in the classroom.

[Figure 5 next page]

Figure 5

*Position of Critical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom Change*



In this section, I describe the teacher research questions, Mary and Dan asked, as well as the critical theory that inspired their research. I also, outline the impact of their research on these two teachers and their students. The extent to which they pursued critical inquiry appeared in their interest in bringing about social justice in their classrooms. Their projects resulted in the essential elements of critical teacher research including social change, democratization, and emancipation.

### **Critical Research Questions**

In their teacher research projects, Mary and Dan used critical theory to solve practical, pedagogical problems they faced in their classrooms. Their focus on race led

them to revise unit plans in their history classrooms. Not only did their projects enhance their practice but they also led to deep change and enlightenment in their classrooms. Both Mary and Dan became advocates for their marginalized students and reconsidered their previous assumptions about the role of race in the classroom.

Table 9 lists the research questions Dan and Mary pursued in their teacher research projects. Compared to the research questions other members in the social studies cohort asked, Dan and Mary asked more critical questions. These focused on social and cultural issues in their classroom and how an awareness of these issues could improve their teaching and student learning.

Table 9

*Critical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom Change: Research Topics and*

Teacher	Topic	Research Topics
Dan	Differentiation and culturally relevant pedagogy	More directly, I hypothesize that implementing the tenets of culturally relevant teaching and differentiation will make learning real and tangible for students, leading to increased academic performance and a potential of “closing the gap.”
Mary	Improving communication between students and the teacher	“Therefore, when given the opportunity to conduct research in my class I knew right away that I wanted to find ways to enhance the communication between me and my students so I could get their ideas, attitudes, and opinions about my teaching and their learning.”

Dan was concerned with the difference in achievement between students of color and white students. He referred specifically to his awareness of an “Achievement Gap” and his course work in the M.Ed. as having led him to come up with his topic for the

teacher research project. He wrote:

In an effort to address the problems of the ‘Achievement Gap’, I propose the widespread implementation of two theories that I learned over the course of the Master’s Program: Culturally Relevant Teaching and Differentiation. While my efforts to hybridize culturally relevant teachings and differentiation may not solve the problem completely; I feel that these two ideas are a positive step in the right direction for me and my students as I personally attempt to do my part to elevate student achievement. More directly I hypothesize that implementing the tenets of culturally relevant teaching and differentiation will make learning real and tangible for students, leading to increased academic performance and a potential ‘closing of the gap.’

At the time of his research, Dan was in his 8th year teaching social studies. He is one of the few black teachers at his school, located in a middle-class, university town, and in the social studies department. Dan worked as a basketball coach and was previously involved in a program for at-risk students at his school. In our interview he described that part of his difficulty completing the teacher research project was the lingering question of “Is this really research?” However over time, he realized that he didn’t have to “prove something” and that he could explore something of particular importance to him in his classroom. The issue of importance for him was the clear discrepancy in achievement between black and white students. He also felt frustrated with the school’s previous efforts to “close the gap” through diversity training for teachers. Thus, he set out to critically inquire into ways he could meet the needs of marginalized students.

Mary worked closely with her administration. She filled numerous leadership roles at her middle school including department chair and a member of the school council. A school of the arts, her school is located in an urban area and has a diverse student population. In our interview Mary described how, in her opinion, “During the



first couple of years I was sort of a control freak for the most part.” She worried about losing control of her classroom and classroom management. At the time of the project she was in her sixth year teaching. She thought that this meant she was at a point where she could let go of some of her control and really critique her relationship with her students.

Mary wrote in her final research report:

Therefore, when given the opportunity to conduct research in my class I knew right away that I wanted to find ways to enhance the communication between me and my students so I could get their ideas, attitudes, and opinions about my teaching and their learning. I truly believe that students care more and participate more in their learning and educational development when they feel they have a voice in the process. Having ownership and control over oneself is a very powerful thing. I think it is very possible for students to truly have “voices” in their classrooms and I think that teachers can create an environment that can allow this while at the same time helping students develop stronger communication skills and a more concrete sense of responsibility. The question then came to be exactly how was I to do this?

For Mary, a major part of answering her question, “how was I to do this?” was developing an awareness that “voice” has cultural characteristics and that not all of her students expressed themselves in the same way. Her project focused primarily on how she and her students of color were miscommunicating.

## **Critical Theory**

Dan and Mary both referenced the work of critical theorists (Table 10) to understand the phenomenon they were observing in their classrooms and form research questions. Not only did these texts provide the impetus for their projects but they also served as the frameworks by which the teachers pursued critical inquiry.

Table 10

*Critical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom Change: Final Research Report*

## Bibliographies

Teacher	Topic	Text(s)
Dan	Differentiation and culturally relevant pedagogy	<p>Education Trust (2003). <i>African American achievement in America</i>. Retrieved from <a href="http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/9AB4AC88-7301-43FF-81A3-B94807B917F/0/AfAmer_Achievement.pdf">http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/9AB4AC88-7301-43FF-81A3-B94807B917F/0/AfAmer_Achievement.pdf</a></p> <p>Jencks, C. &amp; Phillips, M., eds. (1998). <i>The black-white test score gap</i>. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.</p> <p>Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). <i>Dreamkeepers</i>. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.</p> <p>Michigan Association of School Boards. (2001). It takes more than testing...closing the achievement gap. <i>Special Report, 1</i>, 1-7.</p> <p>Sherman, L. (2002). To realize the dream: Research sheds new light on how educators can fulfill the boundless promise that minority children bring to school with them. <i>Northwest Education Magazine, 8</i> (1). Retrieved from <a href="http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/2002f/realize.html">http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/2002f/realize.html</a>.</p> <p>Skowron, J. (2001). <i>How to differentiate instruction</i>. Glenview, IL: Pearson Professional Development.</p>
Mary	Improving communication between students and teachers	<p>Gay, G. (2000). <i>Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice</i>. NY: Teacher's College Press, 2000.</p> <p>Payne, R. (2003). <i>A framework for understanding poverty</i>.</p>

Perhaps the most striking example of the way in which critical inquiry led the teachers to engage in theory-making was in Dan's project. Inspired by his reading of Ladson-Billings' *Dreamkeepers*, he set out to create a hybrid of two theories that

resonated with him – culturally relevant pedagogy and differentiation. Dan blended various aspects of these theories for his classroom context and made them into something of his own. Here he explained:

Culturally Relevant Teaching supporters also suggest “‘students (should be) apprenticed in a learning community rather than taught in an isolated and unrelated way’” (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Using differentiation’s ideal of “‘honoring the individuality of students in terms of their experiences, interests, and prior knowledge’” (Skowron, 2001), I attempted to hybridize my two educational theories seeking to create an inclusive environment (academically as well as socially) in which each student’s worth and contribution was valued.

Dan was not entirely convinced of the usefulness of one theory over the other. So, he took parts of the theories of culturally relevant pedagogy and differentiation and created something new in his classroom which he called “Differentiated Culturally Relevant” teaching.

Mary found Geneva Gay’s (2000) text, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, particularly useful in helping her to critically inquire about relationships in her classroom. She wrote:

However, right around the same time I was asked to read Geneva Gay’s book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, in one of my graduate classes. It began to really help me consider the communication, or lack there of, that was taking place in my classroom. My sixth period class is comprised mostly of African-American children and being that I am a Caucasian teacher I wanted to really evaluate the way that I was communicating with them culturally.

Mary “considered” Gay’s text and the theoretical framework she presented. Gay’s work led Mary to reconsider her expectations for students. In her final research report, she describe a “ah-ha moment” that occurred when she read *Culturally Responsive Teaching*:

I expected my students to be “‘silent and look at [me] when they are talking and to wait to be acknowledged before ... tak[ing] their turn in talking’” (Gay, p.90). I then expected them to answer one at a time so we

could move the instruction right along. All the “breaking in and talking over” was bothersome to me and I considered it very rude and unacceptable. It was after all, not a sign of good manners to interrupt, right? Then it was as if I had an “a-ha” moment while reading Gay. In her discussion of ethnic variations in communication styles, she discusses the “participatory interactive style of communicating,” otherwise known as “call-response,” among most African Americans.

Mary realized that her interactions with her students were culturally biased. Whereas before she felt her students were “very rude,” after reading Gay’s text, she discovered a theoretical explanation for the manner in which her African American students talked in class. This critical theory resonated with Mary and as a result, she set out to study ways to communicate with her students in more culturally relevant ways.

Dan and Mary’s teacher research projects were inspired by critical theory. They used this theory to help them understand the phenomenon they were observing in their classrooms and to form their teacher research questions. Reading these texts impacted them personally and also changed the way they worked with their students.

### **Impact on Teachers**

Through the teacher research process Dan and Mary were impacted professionally and personally. Their research challenged their cultural assumptions and led to changes in the way they worked with their marginalized students. Their projects led to a marked change in the way their classrooms operated and the teaching and learning that went on there. In the process they created more democratic classrooms and brought about social change. For both teachers the experience was emancipatory in that it allowed them to reinvent their roles within the classroom.

Based on his reading of critical theory Dan created a hybrid of culturally relevant pedagogy and differentiation which he applied them to two units of study:

In order to test my theory that Culturally Relevant Teaching and Differentiation, when combined could increase student engagement and achievement, I carefully constructed two units of instruction embodying the two theories. One unit consisted of instruction on the Civil War and the other on World War I and the Roaring 20s.

He went on to describe how he diverged from his normal formula of “lecture, guided practice, and independent practice” and “constructed them in a totally differentiated manner” that also addressed “each student’s individuality.” He gave the students choice in the assignments they completed, provided content that covered a wide range of multicultural topics and built in ample opportunities for student success.

Through the course of his teacher research, he implemented alternative teaching strategies that helped him learn more about effective teaching and learning in the social studies. Part of his research also involved using his students as sources of data. He interviewed his students, conducted focus group interviews, and analyzed their work. A benefit of this interaction, beyond providing insight about the effectiveness of his lessons, was that it opened up dialogue between Dan and his students. In his final research report he reflected, “Another wide-ranging implication for me is that I have learned not only to ‘listen’ to my students, but to also use what they have to say to ‘empower’ them.” By systematically and intentionally studying his students, Dan listened to them in an authentic manner. He heard his students and acted on what they said in order to help his students become more empowered.

In the teacher research process Dan gained new insight about his role as a “black history” teacher. In his final research report he wrote:

I have always tried to be a history teacher, not a ‘Black’ history teacher. By this I mean I have always tried to ‘walk the middle of the road’

culturally, as a professional. I have tried to do this by teaching in a ‘culture-blind’ fashion. I have come to realize that I have been depriving, not just myself but also my students of different cultures, of the beauty that different cultures offer to society. Being able to not only openly embrace my culture but also that of my other students, I can more broadly expand my student’s horizons leading to increased achievement.

Teacher research was an emancipatory experience for Dan. He realized he had been “depriving” himself and his students. Through teacher research he explored ways he could bring culturally relevant pedagogy into the classroom. As a result, he was no longer careful to “walk the middle of the road.” Rather he learned to emphasize the “beauty that different cultures offer society” and came to see the value of his cultural background as it related to teaching.

Mary’s teacher research led her to reconsider her previous assumptions about the role of culture in her classroom particularly as it related to communication. She began her study by asking her students to write her a letter. Later in her final research report she reflected on her students’ letters. She wrote:

What I learned from students through this letter writing activity was incredible. Those letters gave me more insight on my students than I had been able to get for the last seven months of school. I learned about their talents and interests, some tough situations some were facing and valuable feedback about the China Unit. Basically I felt that the letters from students were actually a gift of a new book of knowledge concerning my classroom, my teaching, and most importantly my students.

By involving her students in her teacher research, Mary became more tuned in to her students. She learned more about their talents, interests, and personal lives. She became a “student” of her students – the letters from her students “were actually a gift of a new book of knowledge.”

Based on the letters she received from her students, the critical theory she read, and the other data she collected in her teacher research, Mary changed her teaching

practices. She learned about effective communication in her classroom and its relationship to effective teaching. As a result Mary changed her unit on European colonialism. She wrote in her final research report:

More importantly, this method of communication allowed me to better assess the comprehension and understanding that was or was not taking place in my classroom on a more frequent basis. This became especially helpful during our study of the European colonialism and imperialism of the African continent. Students' responses led me to see that I needed to help them establish a better base line of where in history this occurred. Students were relying on their pre-existing knowledge of slavery in the United States and tried to make connections instead of focusing on and making connections with the issues in African countries. This led me to do an entirely new set of lessons where we focused on what was occurring in the United States and in the African continent simultaneously.

Based on her research Mary changed her teaching activities and felt that her students gained a "much better understanding of the time element which led them to walk away from the unit of study with a more structured understanding of how the past in Africa continues to plague its' present and future." Her new-found determination to communicate with her students led her to rethink the way she taught and to develop new strategies to use.

In reflecting on the impact of her teacher research, Mary wrote:

Overall with this research, I have learned to take a step back, relax on my control of the classroom, and become an observer. In doing so I have been able to "see" learning and understanding that I otherwise would have missed. I have learned that students enjoy having a "voice".

She not only learned how to make her lessons more effective and culturally relevant, but she also learned how to improve her relationship with her students and give them a "voice" in the classroom. Her research made her aware of her strengths as a teacher and also areas in need of improvement. She wrote in her final research report:

It [teacher research] has made me be very thankful for my strengths as an educator and a communicator, but it has also very much pointed out my weaknesses as well. I need to continue to focus on my listening skills. I like to think I do a good job of it, but I know that if I am really willing to build a bridge of communication with my kids, if I am to get them to buy into their education, - that if I open this door I better show them some results. If they are willing to speak, I must be more than willing to listen and to act. It's funny – we communicate in so many ways each and every day of our lives never really realizing just what is misunderstood, not heard, and not seen by the people with which we are trying to reach!

In the process of her research Mary had to confront areas of her teaching in which she failed to communicate effectively. She realized the importance of building a “bridge of communication” with her students in order to “reach” them. By creating a more democratic classroom, in which her students had more of a voice, she brought about social change. In challenging the traditional relationship between a teacher and her students, she also experienced emancipation. As a result of her teacher research she was now free to explore new avenues of communication and new ways to relate to her students.

The impact of teacher research on Dan and Mary provide evidence of the extent to which they pursued critical inquiry through teacher research. Their projects led to a marked change in the way their classrooms operated and the teaching and learning that went on there. One key element of critical inquiry in teacher research is movement toward more democratic forms of education. Both Dan and Mary became advocates for their marginalized students and worked to help them experience success. As a result they brought about social change and emancipation by making their classrooms more democratic places

### **Impact on Students**



The extent to which teachers pursued critical inquiry was evident also in the implications of their research for their students. As a result of their teacher research projects they changed the way they worked with their students. The most striking evidence of the change that resulted was the way in which Dan and Mary became advocates for the students they studied. By becoming more in tune with their students' needs over the course of the research process, they created more democratic classrooms. This brought about social change and emancipation for their students.

In describing his methods for collecting data, Dan refers to "student talk" which he said was, "invaluable as I set out to record and understand my findings." By including his students in the data collection process in focus groups, casual conversation, and interviews, he was able to learn more about his students needs. He also uncovered whether his culturally relevant and differentiated instruction made a difference for his students. In one example, Dan described his interview of Juan:

One of the questions that I asked Juan in our one-on-one interviews was, "Why did you do so much better on our unit plans (Juan received an 80/C on the Civil War unit plan and an 86/B on the WWI-Roaring 20s plan) as opposed to the other activities that we have done in class?" Juan's response was "Well, I could learn about my people in this way." I probed more, "What do you mean?" He said, "I had the chance to learn about Latinos, to learn about me, as well as the other Americans." I asked him how he felt about the "types" of assignments and tasks that were available to him through these assignments? He responded that "he felt control."

For Juan the inclusion of Latinos in his U.S. history class meant that he could study his "people" along with "other Americans." History became more relevant to him and his experiences. Later when Dan reflected on this interview with Juan he wrote, "I felt vindicated and relieved for Juan's comments seemed to indicate that Differentiation in a Culturally Relevant Format appealed more to him, led him to a higher level of

engagement, and resulted in an increased degree of academic success.” Through the teacher research process, Dan changed his teaching style and Juan was more engaged and experienced a higher degree of academic success.

Similar to Juan, Donna, another of Dan’s students, found his culturally relevant lessons more engaging because they gave her the opportunity to study her culture. Dan described his interview with Donna in his final research report:

I asked why she thought history was hard. She responded by saying, “I don’t care about this stuff. I don’t like history.” When I asked her, why she did not like history. She stated, “This stuff ain’t about me.” Therefore, I followed up by asking her why she had done so well on her unit project. She said, “We had a chance to learn about black people. I’m into that!”

U.S. history became engaging for Donna when she had the opportunity to study black history, something that she was “into.” She received high marks on her unit project whereas previously she had felt “history was hard.”

Cy, an African American student, was another example of how Dan’s teacher research positively impacted his marginalized students. Here Dan reflected on his conversation with Cy:

Looking at Cy experience success in this manner (in his eyes the ‘first time all year’), showed me obviously an academic achievement but also a level of personal achievement for Cy. He sees that he ‘can do him’, in short that he can succeed. Having had him for the past two years, I readily admit that I have never seen him so eager to learn and experience success. While I can not be 100% sure what caused this ‘light to turn on’ within Cy, I do know that having taught Cy without using a differentiated, culturally relevant pedagogy, he had not found success and when I integrated this unit, he did in fact experience success.

Through his critical inquiry into how best to meet the needs of his students of color, including Juan, Donna, and Cy, Dan’s relationship with his students shifted. He emphasized their culture in authentic and meaningful ways in the classroom. This made

the content he taught, and the manner in which he taught it, more democratic. This led to social change as his students experienced new found success.

Describing the implications of her teacher research during our interview Mary said, “Kids need to know what they are getting into when they come to school.” She felt strongly that success for her students of color meant understanding that school is a “white, middle class game” and “if these kids can manage and understand [the game] then there chances of success go up, even on tests.” She felt that teachers need to make school less of a “mystery” and “not a trick.” She reflected in her teacher research report:

By taking several steps back and observing my class in a very different way, I realized that there was a great deal more learning occurring in my sixth period class, especially during seminars. I also learned that even though I thought I was very culturally responsive in my classroom, I still had a lot to learn.

Her willingness to become more culturally responsive in her classroom led Mary to realize the special needs of her students of color and the ways that she could help them succeed in a “white, middle class game.”

An indication of Mary’s willingness to engage in conversation with her students and act on what they said appeared in her final research report. Mary described a data collection “dream day”:

Finally, the use of one-on-one interviews was quite enlightening. Actually the way this collection unfolded was quite interesting. My “dream day” for this data collection appeared one day after school when several students from my sixth period class (this is the class that I have been using for this study) stayed for one of my two weekly tutoring sessions. As a matter of fact, all the students in tutoring were from my sixth period class! As we started to wrap the session up for the afternoon I started asking questions before I even realized it. We talked about what an ideal classroom for them would look like, what assignments they would have, etc. After coming to a quick consensus that homework would no longer exist, I realized that these students were talking to me in a VERY open manner. I realized this when I asked questions that specifically pertained to me and

my class. I jotted down notes as quickly as I could and asked students what they might suggest that I do to get the rest of their class members to answer the same questions they had just answered. I asked about a survey and at first they said sure. Then one young man said, “You know Ms. [last name deleted], I think sometimes when kids get stuff like that they just don’t take it seriously. I think you should let us talk in small groups and then I bet you would get what you are looking for.” Light bulb Moment! I thought – yes- I think you might be right and asked if each of them would consider leading one of those groups.

In this example, Mary’s students experienced a new position relative to their teacher. In the teacher research process they had the opportunity to provide their feedback in an honest and open manner. In effect they gained more control over their classroom experience.

The extent to which Dan and Mary pursued critical inquiry was evident in the impact of their research on their students. Both of their teacher research projects emphasized the importance of communication between teachers and students and cultural relevance in instruction and interaction. By becoming more aware of their marginalized students’ needs over the course of the research process, they created more democratic classrooms. As a result of their teacher research projects they changed the way they worked with their students. This brought about social change and emancipation for their students. Their students took on new roles in the classroom and gained more control over their learning experiences.

### **Section Summary**

Compared to the previous groups of teachers, Dan and Mary pursued critical inquiry to a greater extent in their teacher research. This was evident in their focus on both pedagogical and social issues and the dramatic changes in their classroom practices

that resulted. Unlike the previous two groups of teachers their projects also set out to critically inquire about the impact of social and cultural issues on their students. These teachers not only considered their marginalized students in their studies but also worked to make their classrooms more democratic places. The results of this research were emancipatory for the teachers and their students as they challenged racial stereotypes and the traditional relationship between teachers and students. At the same time, their research had practical implications. In both cases, the teachers used what they learned to alter a specific teaching and learning activity.

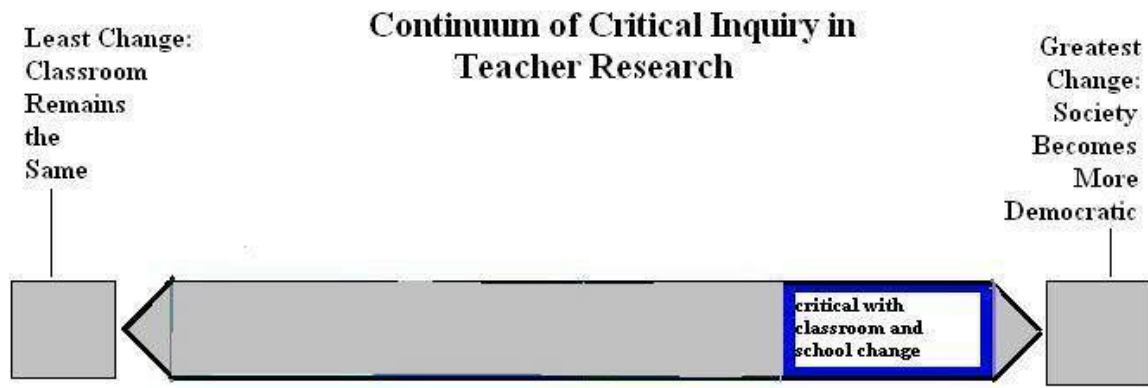
However, they still hold a space along the continuum one step away from the far right. This space is reserved for Evan and Erin. These teachers, of all of the teacher researchers in the social studies cohort, pursued critical inquiry to the greatest extent.

### **Critical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom and School Change**

The final two teacher researchers, Erin and Evan, occupy a position farthest right on the continuum compared to their peers in the social studies cohort (see Figure 6). These two teachers pursued teacher research that examined race and worked to make their classrooms and schools more democratic places. They consulted critical theory and worked to incorporate it into their classrooms. Through the process Erin and Evan became politically empowered and worked for social reform by advocating for their marginalized students.

Figure 6

*Position of Critical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom and School Change*



### Critical Research Questions

Erin and Evan focused on questions about race and ethnicity. Their projects met McKernan's definition of critical action research - "the struggle is for more rational, just and democratic forms of education" (p. 27). Table 11 highlights the central questions of their research projects. It is important to note that their projects resulted from practical issues they faced in their classrooms. Erin had four African American males enrolled in one of her classes and Evan had seven Latino students – these were both unusual circumstances since they taught in predominately white schools. Their projects grew out of practical teaching and classroom management concerns. The quotations in the table were taken from their final research reports.

Table 11

*Critical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom and School Change: Research Topics and Questions*

Teacher	Topic	Research Topics and Questions
Erin	African-American males and achievement	“Why are African American males generally low achievers in my social studies classroom?”
Evan	Latino students in US history	“What if a few of the students in the class cannot speak English or have no prior life experiences in American culture? As a United States history teacher where the content drives the course and new knowledge is built on prior experiences in the country, meeting the needs of Latino students in the classroom presents a unique dilemma”

The impetus for Erin’s project grew from a nagging discomfort she felt that the African American males in her eight grade class were not doing as well as her other students. She wrote:

Since returning to teaching seven years ago, I have noticed a disturbing trend in my classroom that concerns a group of my students. This group consists of the young African American males. Except for a few, they have been low achievers and discipline problems in my social studies classroom. I have seen this trend every year. Within the first few days of school, it becomes evident which students are the ones that have disconnected from school. I have been frustrated time and time again with my efforts to reach out to them. I have always believed that all students can learn in my classroom if I can find a way to reach them and connect. I had not been successful in my attempts to reach out and relate to this group of African American males. I found this to be unacceptable but with the multitude of work and responsibilities I had as a teacher, I never had the time to delve into the reasons why I see this trend in my classroom. This teacher research project has afforded me the opportunity to do so.

At the time of the project Erin had been teaching for more than fourteen years. She took time off mid-career to raise her two sons before joining the staff at her current middle

school several years ago. This middle school is located in an affluent, predominately white suburb. In our interview she described how she was perceived among her team of eighth grade teachers, “I don’t know if I’m like the mom on the team. I don’t mother them in that they get away with stuff but, they know that I am the one they can come to talk to.” From this position Erin used the teacher research opportunity to look more critically at the role of race in her classroom and school. She wrote:

The question for my teacher research project is this: Why are African American males generally low achievers in my social studies classroom? This has been my guiding question throughout my research. There are also other questions that needed to be addressed in an attempt to find an answer to my central question. They include the following. Do these students feel any connection to the material I teach about North Carolina? Do they feel connected to our school? Does my school have a hidden curriculum concerning African American males? What is it that makes a few African American males successful in my classroom? What are the outside influences that this group of young men face daily that affects their school performance? These were the questions that I was mulling over as I began my research. I knew what I was seeing in my classroom concerning African American males but I wanted to know why I was seeing the type of behaviors I was observing.

In order to answer her research questions and to “know why” her African American males were generally low achievers, Erin looked for information in a variety of sources. She started with an Internet search of relevant articles and texts. She wrote, “Armed with information and strategies from the articles and the book I read about how to reach African American males, I began to take an in-depth look at not only my own classroom but my school as well.” In order to take this “in-depth look,” Erin looked at her students’ cumulative folders and talked to their “previous teachers, guidance counselors, the school social worker, and community leaders.” Erin also conducted formal and informal interviews with the four African American males in her classes.



Evan was inspired to pursue his teacher research project by an awareness that the demographics of his school were changing and that some of his students were being left behind. Evan said:

I envisioned it [teacher research] as a growth thing. In other words you look at your own individual teaching situation and just want to find out more about how things work. At that time we [at the high school] were having these large numbers of ESL students that were being mainstreamed into our classes for the first time. Something new, something you had to deal with on a daily basis in US history – teaching history class with these kids who had not cultural background to build on. That’s why I did it. I think everybody had different motivation.

Important is Evan’s sense of teacher research as “growth.” Evan’s openness to new things may be somewhat surprising since he is a “veteran” teacher. At the time of this study he was finishing his twenty-eighth year. Not only had he always taught at his current high school but he also graduated from there as a student. Evan is a basketball and football coach. He is well known in the rural community in which he teaches. Perhaps it was his reputation that allowed him to critique the treatment of Latino students at his school to the extent he did - he could get the attention of school leaders and other teachers.

### **Critical Theory**

Critical theory inspired both Erin and Evan’s teacher research projects (Table 12); they learned about cultural differences and how they impact teaching and learning. Based on these texts, they formed their research questions and designed and implemented their classroom changes. These texts also led Erin and Evan to look more critically at the school community and the way it treated their students of color.

Table 12

*Critical Teacher Research that Resulted in Classroom and School Change: Bibliography*

Teacher	Topic	Text(s)
Erin	African-American males and achievement	<p>Bennett, D. D. Are Schools Failing Black Boys? LEGL 4500/6500-Employment Law. Retrieved 10/20/2004 from <a href="http://www.terry.uga.edu/~dawnba/4500FailingBlkBoys.html">www.terry.uga.edu/~dawnba/4500FailingBlkBoys.html</a>.</p> <p>Burrell, S. <i>Catalyst Chicago</i>. School Deck Stacked Against Black Boys. Retrieved 10/20/2004 from <a href="http://www.catalyst-Chicago.org/03-01/0301boys.htm">www.catalyst-Chicago.org/03-01/0301boys.htm</a>.</p> <p>Kuykendall, C. (1992). <i>From rage to hope: Strategies for reclaiming black and Hispanic youth</i>. Bloomington, Illinois: National Education Service.</p> <p>Simeon, C. (2001). How Two Young Men Succeeded Against the Odds. Retrieved 10/20/2004 from <a href="http://www.research.vt.edu/resmag/resmag/2001/black_students.html">www.research.vt.edu/resmag/resmag/2001/black_students.html</a>.</p> <p>Smith, R.A. Saving Black Boys. Retrieved 10/20/2004 from <a href="http://www.Prospect.org/print/V15/2/smith-ro.html">www.Prospect.org/print/V15/2/smith-ro.html</a>.</p> <p>Schwartz, W. School Practices for Equitable Discipline of African American Students. <i>Eric Digest</i>. Retrieved 10/20/2004 from <a href="http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-1discipline.html">www.ericdigests.org/2002-1discipline.html</a>.</p>
Evan	Latino students in US history	<p>Gay, G. (2000). <i>Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice</i>. New York: Teachers College Press.</p> <p>Kuykendall, C. (1992). <i>From Rage to Hope: Strategies for Reclaiming Black &amp; Hispanic Students</i> Bloomington: National Educational Service.</p> <p>Ladson-Billings, G. (1997). <i>The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children</i>. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.</p>

		<p>Palmer, M. T. (2003). <i>The Schooling Experience of Latina Immigrant High School Students</i>. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.</p> <p>Wrigley, P. (2001). <i>The Help! Kit: A Resource Guide for Secondary Teachers of Migrant English Language Learners</i>. Oneonta: State University of New York at Oneonta.</p>
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The cornerstone text for Erin’s project, *From Rage to Hope: Strategies for Reclaiming Black and Hispanic Students* (Kuykendall, 1992) was passed on to her from Evan. She believed that it was a book that “every teacher ought to read.” For Erin the text clarified what she was seeing in her classroom. She explained:

[The book] Talks about specifically African American males and Latinos who don’t feel a connection to school that if we don’t find some way of giving them hope for a better future we see that hope leaving and becoming hopelessness and that hope turning to rage. Because I saw a lot of anger in these students. They didn’t seem to know what they were angry at but, they were angry. You would see a lot of that in class.

By helping Erin to articulate her experiences, the text also helped Erin search for alternatives – ways to bring “hope” to her marginalized students and include them in the school community.

Evan also mentioned *Rage to Hope* as an impetus for his project. For him it provided strategies for working with his Latino students which he tested out during his teacher research. Another important text for Evan was Maria Teresa Palmer’s (2003) dissertation, *The Schooling Experience of Latina Immigrant High School Students*, which he said “inspired” his research. Evan related to Palmer’s research design – she researched Latinas in a North Carolina high school. He also drew parallels between her writing and his experiences. He wrote:

In the dissertation, she uses the term “confianza”, which refers to a type of relationship that allows someone to discuss matters that are embarrassing or private. Palmer’s research shows that most Latino students in public schools do not have an advocate. They need caring teachers to help them to navigate through the system. Teachers must gain an understanding of both the language and cultural barriers that these students face in schools. She stresses the need for teachers to build special relationships with Latino students (Palmer, 2003). Her research gave me great insight into the Latino experience in public schools and prepared me for my own teacher research in this area.

Later in our interview Evan returned to Palmer’s dissertation which he read in a M.Ed. course. He said that although Palmer’s dissertation and the other texts he read prepared him with insights about the Latino culture, he was interested in testing their theories. He said, “We’ve taken these classes and read these books but now this is real life...are some of these ideas going to work?” For Evan, then, the teacher research project was about “growing” by theorizing in his own classroom context.

### **Impact on Teachers**

The goal of critical inquiry is to not only to understand social conditions but also to work for social and political change; as a result there is movement toward greater democracy and emancipation for the teachers and the students. That is why I place Erin and Evan towards the critical inquiry part of the continuum, more so than Mary and Dan. Their projects not only studied the educational experiences of their students of color but attempted to understand ways to change the school community to lead to more democratic experiences for students.

Through her research Erin learned many insights about the experiences of African American students at the school in which she taught and the existence of, in her words, a “hidden curriculum.” The instructor of the *Teacher as Researcher* remarked on Erin’s

political interpretation of her student data during our one-on-one interview. He said, “I mean the way Erin really, really transformed the way she looked at her kids and her school. It was clearly almost Marxist [in interpretation].” For example, in a discussion with the 8<sup>th</sup> grade administrator Erin pointed out that a disproportionate number of black males were suspended from school than their white peers. Something she felt, “should send up red flags all over the place! There is a whole group of students who are not connecting and are disengaging from school.” Also she learned about how much lower African American students perform at her school on standardized tests. About which she said in an interview, “Our school is generally not reaching these [African American] kids. We were an honored ‘School of excellence’ but how can we do that when we have a group of students who are ‘disconnected’ to school?” As a result of her critical inquiry through the teacher researcher project, Erin felt empowered enough to share the knowledge with her school community. In her final research report Erin described her beliefs:

We have to change our thinking at Apex Middle from one where little is expected of the African American males to one where there is a belief that all students (no matter their race, economic background, or gender) can succeed. We, as educators, must find a way to reach them. I believe I can be an agent for change at my school by sharing my teacher research with the faculty, administrators and staff. Apex Middle needs to formulate plans to address the situation not to just meet the No Child Left Behind legislation but to empower our African American males and give them HOPE!

Erin’s discovery over the course of her critical inquiry into the experiences of the black males in her classroom made her realize that her school had a “hidden curriculum” for the Bus 16 kids. She wrote:

I talked with the minister at the church that James attends and he shared with me that this is a very poor community with a high degree of violence

and drugs. I have no idea what these students face on a day-to-day basis. Then to be bussed out of their district to a school where they do not have a connection to the community or the school community, must be very difficult. They feel like unwanted outsiders and are treated as such. I have heard many teachers say, “If only we didn’t have those Bus 16 students” or “I wish Bus 16 would break down on the way to school.” The academic expectations as well as the behavioral expectations are low for this group.

Erin’s relationship with the school community shifted as a result of her critical inquiry.

By asking questions of community members she learned more about the African American males that she had seen struggling in her classroom. She juxtaposed this new knowledge with what she knew about how her students were viewed by other teachers. Rather than be content with understanding the situation facing her African American male students, Erin went a step further towards understanding how she could intervene on their behalf and change their school experiences. She summed up her beliefs when she said, “I think that some kids come to school and it’s their only safe place they have. Not everybody but you can tell the ones that this might be their only safe place.”

In our follow-up interview Erin talked about how she was working as a change agent at her school by sharing her research findings with other teachers at the school. She described her plans for her presentation to the faculty, “I am going to share some of what I learned just looking at where these kids come from. They are actually talking about getting us a bus and just taking us down to where these kids are from.” Through her critical inquiry, Erin gained not only an understanding of the experiences of her disaffected African American students but she also learned how to be an advocate and work for change on the students’ behalf within her school community.

Evan also became an agent of change in his school as a result of his teacher research project. Evan wrote in his final research report his view of student advocacy:

My research of the Latino experience also pointed out the importance of advocating for these students in the school. Fortunately, I had a very good working relationship with Liz, the lead ESL teacher at the school. She was able to give me great insight into some specific problems that my Latino students were encountering in the system.

Beyond merely intervening on his Latino students' behalf, Evan and the ESL teacher, Liz, worked with other teachers to help them learn strategies for teaching Latino students. Evan also solicited his administrators to allow him to teach a section of United States history with predominately Latino students.

Erin and Evan approached the goal of critical inquiry in developing an understanding of social conditions and using this understanding to work for social and political change. Their teacher research fundamentally influenced the way they viewed their marginalized students; they not only studied the educational experiences of their students of color but attempted to understand ways to change the school community to lead to a more democratic experience for students.

### **Impact on Students**

The changes experienced by Erin and Evan during their teacher research also impacted their students. As mentioned earlier one key element of critical inquiry in teacher research is movement toward more democratic forms of education. Both Erin and Evan became critical of their schools' treatment of their students of color and became advocates for their students.

It was through teacher research that Erin became an advocate for her African American male students by offering them a "safe place." She wrote in her final research report, "The most important way I collected data was by developing a genuine caring

relationship with the students and keeping a journal record of what was said or done by them in class.” Her final research report detailed the impact of her seeking “a genuine caring relationship” on the four students in her study – Chris, James, Larence, and D’Andre. She described these four students:

They are all students in my 5th period North Carolina social studies class. I chose Chris to be part of my study because he is an African American male student who is doing well in my class. I wanted to see why he was thriving while the others were not. In early conversations with him, I have discovered that both his parents are professional people. His mother is a nurse and his father works for IBM. They are involved in his life and take an active interest in his learning. They expect him to do well in school and to attend college. James is a student whom I had in class last year when I taught one section of 7th grade social studies. He came in halfway through the school year. He barely passed my class last year and the first nine weeks of this year, he had a low D. James has an IEP and has been diagnosed with ADHD. He is a live wire in and out of the classroom. He is constantly talking and moving. When I say anything to him, he acts silly. There are times though, that he will fly off the handle when asked to conform to class rules. He says, “Why y’all always in my business?” He can be very disrespectful to both his teachers and administrators. However, his mother plays an important role in his life. She works long hours but takes an active interest in her son. She emails his teachers and has given us her cell phone number if we ever need to get in touch. He is a young man who could go either way. Larence and D’Andre have totally disengaged from school. They appear to be living up to the low expectations everyone has for them. They have an attitude of “Why bother?” and “What’s it matter anyway?” I had Larence say to me the first month of school, “You don’t want me here anyway so why you trying to act like you care?” How sad for these young men to feel so alienated from school. Since the start of school, they have been failing, making no effort at all to do any work, and are constantly disrupting class by blurting out and making inappropriate remarks. Their disruptions are interfering with the learning of the other twenty-five students in the class. Some days I feel at my wits end with these two. I knew things couldn’t go on like this so I decided in September that they would become part of the focus for my research study.

Erin acknowledged the range of experiences of the four African American males in her fifth period social studies class; Chris was successful, James “is a young man who could go either way” and Larence and D’Andre were “totally disengaged from school.” In



order to learn more about why these four students had such different experiences, Erin checked on their official records and engaged them in conversation.

In the process Erin became an advocate for these students. Her advocacy was subtle – she simply talked to the four students in an effort to develop a relationship with them and to help them to feel connected to some aspect of school. Here she described her growing relationship with Chris:

He [Chris] and I became very close. He would come and talk to me about what was going on. Ask me, “What do you think I should do?” And so I really did have a great relationship with him. He would just talk to me about everyday stuff. I would see his head down, and ask ‘so what’s going on today what’s up?’ He’d say, ‘Oh man I just flunked a test in math’ “Have you talked to the math teacher? What can we do?”

The phrase, “What can *we* do?” very simply summed up the impact of Erin’s teacher research on Chris. He found in Erin an advocate and someone he could talk to and Chris developed a close relationship with his teacher as a result.

Although Chris was positively impacted by her teacher research, Erin considered James to be her biggest success. When she interviewed James she discovered he felt tremendous pressure to “fit in” and get involved with “‘things’ going on in his neighborhood.” According to Erin a combination of James’ support at home and her relationship with him, helped to resist this pressure and experience some success at school. She wrote in her final research report:

Of the four young men, it is James that I have seen the most change in during the year. He played on the football and the basketball teams this year. I would talk to him about what went on in the games and how he played. I also attended several games to watch him play. We both like sports, so that was a starting point on which to build our relationship. He began to talk about what was going on in his life and how he felt about school. James is very gregarious and outgoing. He is well liked at school but admits that he sometimes receives negative feedback from his peers when he is being disruptive. James has gotten into the habit of stopping by

in the morning or poking his head in between classes just to say hello. He stops by when he is having a bad day or just needs someone to talk with. One day recently, he proudly brought his mother in to meet me. He obviously adores her but he also was excited about his mother meeting me. His mother thanked me for taking an interest in him and being there for him at school. I have seen improvement in James. He is not as disruptive in class and his grades have gone up. The second grading period he pulled his grade up to a 77% and the third grading period, he had a 83.7. He had worked very hard so I gave him an opportunity to try for a “B” by telling him he could turn in extra credit current event. It was up to him. The next morning, he came in before school and handed it to me. He is very proud of his grade and he should be.

Erin’s interest in learning more about James and her work to help him succeed positively impacted his schooling experience. Not only did he find in Erin a teacher with whom to talk but he also found someone who cheered for him on the football field and in the classroom. James’ mom acknowledged the “interest” Erin had taken and its positive effects; as a result, James not only had improved grades but he acted out less in class.

According to Erin, D’Andre also was positively impacted by her teacher research.

She wrote:

He began to be less of a discipline problem and at times participated in class activities. This was not true elsewhere where his behavior was causing problems...He said, “I like Ms. [last name deleted] ‘cause she talks to me like I’m somebody and listens to me.” Those words speak volumes about what a caring, trusting relationship can accomplish. D’Andre’s grades for my class have improved somewhat. He is no longer failing and is passing with a “D.” It is a small victory but a victory nonetheless.

Like James, D’Andre felt that Erin was someone who “talks to me like I’m somebody and listens to me.” In her, he found someone he could trust and as a result he began to experience modest improvement in his grades.

The positive impact of Erin's teacher research on Larance was less evident. Erin expressed frustration and disappointment that he was someone who shouldn't have "an opportunity to reach." She reflected on this in her final research report:

I didn't have much of an opportunity to reach Larance. As I pointed out before, he left in early December after his mother decided she could not handle him anymore and sent him back to Redirection, the school for troubled teens. I want to share what occurred a week or so before he left. Though he had regarded me with suspicion and wondered what my angle was in talking to him, he appeared at my door one morning before school. He asked me what he needed to do well in my class. I talked about the expectations I had for him in class and how bright I thought he was. He at first thought I was joking and then could not believe I was serious. For the next few days, he was a different student in class. He completed his homework and participated in class. Then one day he came in with the attitude and chip on his shoulder again. I wondered what had happened and the next day I found out that his mother was sending him away. I feel awful for him. Every time someone would step in to try to help Larance, his mother would make it impossible by constantly moving him. I guess I'll never understand the reasons.

Erin noted some small gains with Larance; he was a "different student in class." Before she could do more for him, though, Larance was removed from school by his mother. Erin expressed sadness for him and his situation.

Reflecting back over the impact of her teacher research on her students, Erin noted the differences that her "genuine caring and high expectations" could make for her students. She wrote:

I have seen personally that genuine caring and high expectations can make a difference with this group of students in the classroom. I'm sure this would apply to other students as well but this group needed to know that someone believed in them and expected them to achieve. It takes a lot of time and patience to build this kind of relationship. Students just don't start to believe in themselves overnight when they have heard negative expectations for so long, whether spoken or implied. They need to hear "can do" and not "can't do" There need to be high expectations for the young African American males so that the hopelessness they feel doesn't turn to RAGE [all caps in original].

Erin was realistic about the results of her advocacy for her African American, male students. She recognized that “it takes a lot of time and patience” and that it did not always end successfully. However, she concluded her research feeling strongly that she could do something to change her students’ feelings of hopelessness into hope.

Evan, like Erin, took to heart the text *From Rage to Hope* and became an advocate for his Latino students. This led to his intervention on their behalf -- he wanted them to experience success and he intervened on their behalf with other school faculty. He wrote in his final research report:

Throughout the semester, I looked for opportunities to become an advocate for my Latino students. Generally, I found that language barriers created problems for these students in the system. I also discovered that many teachers failed to take into account their cultural differences and often times had unrealistic expectations.

By linking up with the ESL teacher, Liz, at his school, Evan educated himself about the cultural differences that separated his Latino students from the school community. Using this new knowledge he worked to advocate for these kids across the school. He wrote about this in his final research report:

My research of the Latino experience also pointed out the importance of advocating for these students in the school. Fortunately, I had a very good working relationship with Liz, the lead ESL teacher at the school. She was able to give me great insight into some specific problems that my Latino students were encountering in the system. Throughout the semester, I looked for opportunities to become an advocate for my Latino students. Generally, I found that language barriers created problems for these students in the system. I also discovered that many teachers failed to take into account their cultural differences and often times had unrealistic expectations.

Evan’s relationship with Nelcy was a poignant instance of teacher advocacy across the teacher research projects. According to Evan, Nelcy had left an abusive father and moved in with her sister in a town out of the school district. After receiving in

multiple tardy slips Nelcy was assigned lunch detention. Evan happened on her in detention one day and was horrified that the English teacher had not thought to ask Nelcy about her situation. He intervened on Nelcy's behalf with the teacher and the tardies ended. Evan soon noticed another problem with Nelcy, however:

Later, I discovered that Nelcy was failing her Algebra II class II class. She needed the course to graduate in December. With the help of her guidance counselor we were able to get her assigned to our NOVA Net lab where she could complete the course on a computer. She made good progress, but she felt overwhelmed with the amount of work. The NOVA Net teacher only stayed after school on Wednesdays so I found a student tutor to help Nelcy with her lessons. I made special trips to the lab during my planning period to offer words of encouragement. By becoming her advocate and helping her to negotiate the system, Nelcy earned her high school diploma.

Over the course of his teacher research, in understanding the "system" and the way it treated Latino students, Evan learned how to advocate for them. As was the case in his advocacy for Nelcy he went well beyond his normal role as her classroom teacher to help her succeed in school in general and graduate.

In another instance, Evan's student Neftali also got in trouble with the administration. Neftali wore a shirt in a style the principle felt indicated he was in a gang. Evan wrote about the incident in his final research report:

On another occasion, Neftali got in trouble with the administration for wearing his shirt with only the top button fastened. According to one of the assistant principals, Neftali associated with a known gang member at the school, and his dress style symbolized his membership. Because he had been warned three times to wear his shirt in a different manner, he received a five-day out of school suspension. Neftali convinced Liz and myself of his innocence so we appealed his punishment to the principal. Unfortunately, we could not persuade the principal to change his mind. I explained to Neftali that sometimes adults make mistakes, but he needed to make the best of the five days by getting all his make-up work from his teachers. Although I found myself getting angry at the system, I did not want Neftali to become too discouraged. I tried my best to turn a negative

situation into something positive for this young man. As a result of this incident we were able to build a trusting relationship.

In his teacher research report, Evan also included the journal entry he wrote on the day Neftali was suspended. He wrote, “*I hope this is not racism, and I hope he is not in a gang*” [italicized in original]. Evan’s advocacy for Neftali in this case could not prevent his suspension from school. Neftali found in Evan and the ESL teacher, Liz, advocates willing to intervene on his behalf with the principals and an interest in making “a negative situation into something positive.”

Both Erin and Evan worked to make the schooling experiences of their marginalized student “something positive.” They did this by advocating for these kids not only in their own classrooms but also with other colleagues at their schools. While the impact on their students’ success had mixed results, in every case they consciously worked to encourage and support their students.

### **Section Summary**

The final two teacher researchers, Erin and Evan, occupy a position farthest right on the continuum compared to their peers in the social studies cohort. These two teachers pursued teacher research that examined race in order to make their classrooms and schools more democratic places. Their projects originated from practical teaching and classroom management concerns which they worked to solve by studying critical theory. By incorporating critical theory into their classroom research, Erin and Evan became politically empowered. The extent to which they pursued critical inquiry was obvious in the way they worked for social reform and advocacy for their marginalized students.

## **Conclusion**

In response to the research question that framed this study, “Through the teacher research experience, to what extent did social studies teachers pursue critical inquiry into classroom practices?” I found that the members of the social studies cohort pursued critical inquiry to varying degrees. Critical inquiry results in social or cultural change, democratization, and emancipation. In order to describe the elements of critical inquiry experienced by the teachers in this study, I grouped the teachers into four areas along the continuum of critical inquiry – practical teacher research that resulted in little classroom change, practical teacher research that resulted in classroom change, critical teacher research that resulted in classroom change, and critical teacher research that resulted in classroom and school change. All of the teachers in this study pursued critical inquiry through the teacher research. Based on my analysis, I found that the extent to which the teachers pursued critical inquiry differed based on the types of questions the teachers asked and the results of their projects. Postmodern theory helps to articulate this phenomenon.

According to postmodern theory, “There can be no single, privileged way of knowing” (Hollingsworth, 1994, p.9). Critical of meta-narratives or universal truths postmodernism highlights the context specific nature of experience. It is keeping with this critique that teacher research seeks out alternatives to the dominate discourse. Further, postmodern theory holds that seeking alternatives leads to emancipation. According to McCutcheon (1990), “Action research is characterized as systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the

articulation of a rationale or philosophy of practice in order to improve practice"( p. 148). In "understanding practice" the emphasis is placed on the individuality of the experience and the self-critical nature of teacher research. As a result teacher research, "aims to build communities of people committed to enlightening themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action, and consequence in their own situation, emancipating themselves from the institutional and personal constraints that limit their power to live their own legitimate educational and social values" (McTaggart, 1998, p. 35). All of the teacher researchers in this study experienced emancipation through their engagement in critical inquiry in the teacher research process.

The first group of teachers included those who conducted practical teacher research that resulted in little classroom change. Although their projects originated from concern over practical classroom issues, they experienced social change in the teacher research process as they challenged the work of "experts" in their research. This was emancipatory for the teachers in that it changed their role relative to "outsider" knowledge. Their critical inquiry was limited however, since they did not value the social change their students, especially marginalized students, experienced as a result of the alternative teaching strategies they tested. All three teachers in this group studied some form of collaborative learning technique, yet none of them emphasized in their research findings how this strategy enabled democratic conversation between students.

The second group of teachers conducted practical teacher research that resulted in classroom change. This group, while interested in studying issues of practical importance in the classroom, also pursued critical inquiry to a certain extent. Making up the largest group of teacher researchers in this study, they studied specific pedagogical strategies,



philosophies of social studies teaching, and administrative policies. Common across these projects was not only the practical emphasis but also the critical inquiry the teachers pursued. In the teacher research process, these teachers entered into dialogue not only with the “experts” but with their students. They paid attention to their student data and made classroom changes based on what they learned. This democratic conversation with their students altered the dynamic of their classrooms and led to emancipation or freedom from the conventional roles of students and teachers.

The third group of teacher researchers studied issues of race that resulted in classroom change. They set out to ask and answer critical questions related to social justice and democracy in their teacher research. Critical theory inspired their projects and aided them as they analyzed their findings. As a result of their research their classrooms became more democratic. The teachers became advocates for their marginalized students and worked towards more democratic dialogue in the classroom. The results of this research were emancipatory for the teachers and their students as they challenged racial stereotypes and the traditional relationship between teachers and students. At the same time, their research had practical implications. In both cases, the teachers used what they learned to alter a specific teaching and learning activity.

The final group of teachers pursued critical teacher research that resulted in classroom and school change. These teachers set out originally to understand the needs of their marginalized students. In the process they came to recognize and fight against a hidden curriculum in their schools that limited their students’ ability to succeed. They worked to make their classrooms more democratic places, by listening and responding to their students of color and also to make their schools more democratic in their treatment

of marginalized student. Evan and Amy became not only student advocates but also social reformers. They collaborated with colleagues across the school building to work for change. Their work was emancipating for the teachers and their students.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

This study posed the question, “In the teacher research process, to what extent did social studies teachers pursue critical inquiry?” The participants in this study were a group of fourteen, experienced social studies teachers recently graduated from a M.Ed. program at a large research university. The teachers represented a variety of experience levels and taught social studies to students in grades ranged six through twelve. As a part of their degree requirements the teachers took a two-semester course, *Teacher as Researcher I and II* in their final academic year of the M.Ed. program. In this course they created their own teacher research project which they turned in as a final course assignment.

Using the teachers’ final research reports along with ancillary documents and one-on-one interviews, I examined the topics and the results of the teacher research studies in order to determine the extent to which the teachers pursued critical inquiry. Keeping in mind Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1994) call to contribute to a research agenda that examines, “the relationships among teacher inquiry, professional knowledge, and practice” (p. 23), I examined not only the topics the teachers studied and the types of questions they asked, but also, the implications of the teacher research on the teachers and their students. As a result of my data analysis I summarized the characteristics of

similar projects by placing them in four groups arranged along a continuum of critical inquiry – practical teacher research that resulted in little classroom change, practical teacher research that resulted in classroom change, critical teacher research that resulted in classroom change, and critical teacher research that resulted in classroom and school change.

The first group of three teacher researchers asked questions of practical importance but demonstrated little openness in the research process. In the end they implemented very little change in their classrooms; their teacher research experiences affirmed their previous practices. The second group of teachers also asked questions related to practice but their projects led to classroom change both for them and their students. Their research resulted in democratization of the classroom culture. The next group asked critical questions related to race in their projects which impacted their teaching practices. As a result of their research, they became advocates for marginalized students in their classrooms. The final group, similarly looked at questions related to race and ethnicity, their projects dealt less with classroom practice and more with the hidden curriculum in their schools. These teachers became advocates for their students and worked for change within their school communities.

### **Rethinking “Practical” and “Critical” Teacher Research**

The results of this study demonstrate that the current body of educational research on teacher research, with its emphasis on two types of teacher research – critical and practical, does not adequately capture the teacher research experience of the teachers in

my study. Their work did not fall neatly in one of the two categories - practical or critical teacher research. Rather, it spread out along a continuum of critical inquiry.

Proponents of practical teacher research suggest that it is useful for teachers to formalize their inquiry into practical, day-to-day issues of teaching (e.g., Allan & Miller, 1999; Falk & Blumenreich, 2005; Glanz, 1999; MacLean & Mohr, 2004). The argument is that through reflection and practice, the teacher researcher learns new insights about teaching and learning. The emphasis of this form of teacher research is on “real classrooms and real schools” (Allan & Miller, 1990, p. 196) and it responds to the immediacy of teachers’ needs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Importantly, practical teacher research may result in improved practice and student performance but not necessary in social or cultural change.

Proponents of critical teacher point to the potential for radical social and cultural change resulting through the teacher research process (e.g., Berthoff, 1987; Brown & Jones, 2001; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Gitlin & Haddon, 1997; Grundy, 1997; Kincheloe, 1991; McTaggart, 1998; Tripp, 1990). Some within this group are openly critical of practical forms of teacher research, describing them as “benign” or “apolitical” (e.g., Kincheloe, 1995). Proponents of more critical forms of teacher research suggest that teachers should seek deep change or enlightenment through the teacher research process; leading to greater democracy and emancipation. Their goal is toward improving society, not just the world of teacher practice and schooling. Critical teacher research is grounded in critical theory and this translates into teacher researchers asking “powerful questions” about social and cultural issues such as race, gender, and class.

To summarize, the differing perspectives of teacher research that occur in the relevant literature, I created table 1. This table demonstrated the division within the literature regarding the different forms of teacher research.

Table 1

*A Summary: Practical Teacher Research Compared to Critical Teacher Research*

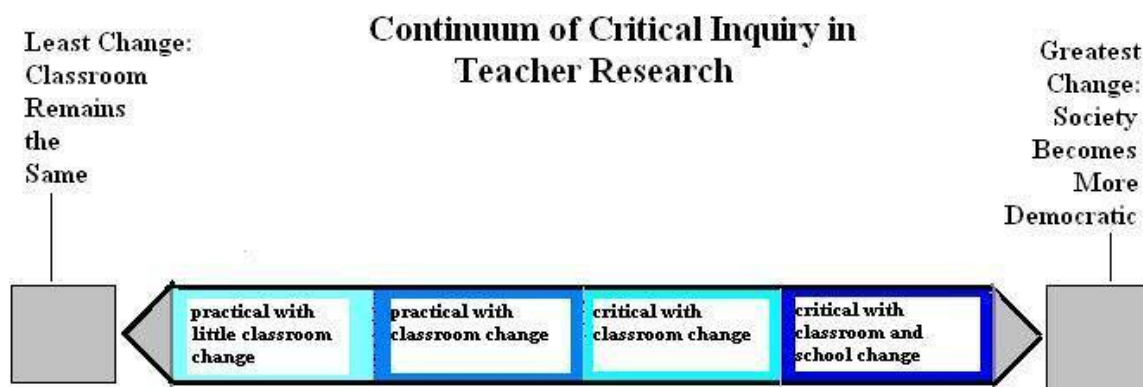
Practical Teacher Research:	Critical Teacher Research:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Practical-Deliberative” (McKernan, 1996)</li> <li>• Concerned with practical knowledge or “craft knowledge”</li> <li>• Interest in day-to-day issues of practice</li> <li>• May result in improved practice and student performance but not social or cultural change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Critical-Emancipatory” (McKernan, 1996)</li> <li>• Concerned with social and cultural factors that impact school</li> <li>• Interest in democratic participation and emancipation</li> <li>• Seeks deep change [enlightenment] within the classroom</li> <li>• Implicit goal towards improving society.</li> </ul>

When the fourteen teachers in the social studies cohort pursued teacher research, their projects did not fit neatly within either side of the table – practical or critical. Rather they appeared to spread out along a continuum of critical inquiry. Of course they did not all achieve the elements of critical teacher research as outlined in the table, but they did pursue critical inquiry to a certain extent. The findings of this study demonstrate that the teacher research process, asking questions, collecting data, and making conclusions, put teachers somewhere on the continuum toward critical teacher research. Figure 2 illustrates the relative position of the teacher researchers in this study along the continuum of critical inquiry. Their teacher research projects provide evidence of the

extent to which the teachers pursued critical inquiry and experienced social change, democratization, and/or emancipation as a result of the teacher research process.

Figure 2

*Relative Location of Teacher Researchers*



By illustrating the multiple and varied ways in which the teachers pursued critical inquiry, this continuum fits with the postmodernist theoretical framework of the study. Similar to Houser (2005), I refer to postmodernism as “an interdisciplinary intellectual movement that tends to reject the universal, structural, mechanical, and hierarchical in favor of an emphasis on difference, multiplicity, and the context-specific nature of experience” (p. 54). Postmodernism rejects meta-narratives – or grand theory – in favor of context specificism and heterogeneity (Schwandt, 2001) and questions modernist beliefs – such as the existence of “universal truth.” Again, according to Houser (2005):

Postmodernist critics reject prevailing assumptions regarding the existence of universal and foundational truths, belief in structural permanence and

unilateral determinacy, the notion of a rational, autonomous subject with an essentially 'human' character separating mankind from the rest of the world, and the idea that it is possible to know *anything* with certainty, including the nature of one's own identity (p. 55).

Rather than embrace a positivist paradigm, postmodernists examine the subjective nature of human experience.

The continuum illustrates the extent to which the teachers pursued critical inquiry in a way that also represents the heterogeneity of their experiences. These teachers do not fit into the frameworks of practical or critical teacher research represented in the relevant educational literature; instead they spread out along a continuum of critical inquiry. The continuum represents movement and the rejection of a "belief in structural permanence." The continuum provides the possibility of the teacher researchers occupying a middle ground between practical and critical teacher research and the potential for movement along the continuum of critical inquiry.

The best examples of practical projects that resulted in critical teacher research where conducted by Mary and Dan and grouped as "critical teacher research that resulted in classroom change." Not only did their projects lead to social change and emancipation but, their practice also changed. Their focus on race led them to revise unit plans in their history classrooms. In the teacher research process they took on the roles of "decision maker, consultant, curriculum developer, analyst, activist, school leader" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999, p. 17). Both Mary and Dan changed the way they taught social studies while also becoming advocates for their formerly marginalized students.

The projects grouped as "practical teacher research that resulted in classroom change" also represented a middle ground. These projects might have been criticized by Kincheloe as (1995) "dangerous" since they focused predominately on practical issues in



the social studies classroom. Despite the practical topics that formed the focus of their teacher research projects (all of teachers changed their practice as a result) their classrooms also became more democratic through their willingness to listen and respond to the needs of students. These teachers became “students” of their students. The teacher research questions they asked turned out to be “powerful” in changing the social dynamic of the classroom. Falk and Blumenreich (2005) write:

The first experience in teacher research is often an end to an old way of teaching -- one in which the teacher has all the answers that the new students must digest. Teacher research can be an introduction to a new way -- one that awakens questions, engages interests, provides resources, and facilitates learning (p. 181).

Beyond merely awakening “questions and engaging interests” the results group of these teachers’ research pointed to the emancipatory possibilities of teacher research for teachers and students. Through the teacher research process they challenged traditional notions about the relationships between teachers and students. As a result their classrooms became more democratic places.

The two teachers grouped under “critical teacher research that resulted in classroom and school change” came the closest to meeting the definition of critical teacher research as described in the table. They fit Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) description of critical teacher research as “[grounded] in critical and democratic social theory and in explicit rejection of the authority of professional experts who produced and accumulated knowledge in ‘scientific’ research settings for use by others in practical settings (p. 16). Both Erin and Evan used critical theory as a lens to examine race in their classrooms. They used this to develop their own knowledge of effective teaching and learning. Although they asked their critical questions, their projects originated from

practical concerns. Evan faced a new situation where he had seven Latino students in one section of U.S. history and Erin had four African American males enrolled in one of her classes. Both were unusual circumstances that impacted the dynamics of their classroom and the way they taught. Their projects were situated in “real classrooms and real schools” (Allan & Miller, 1990, p. 196). According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), “practical inquiry is more likely to respond to the immediacy of the knowledge needs teachers confront in everyday practice and to be foundational for formal research by providing new questions and concerns” (p. 19). It was from the practical concern of meeting these students’ needs that these teacher researchers pursued critical inquiry and came to be advocates and reformers. They found evidence of a hidden curriculum at their schools which they confronted through their research.

The fourth grouping of “Practical teacher research that resulted in little classroom change” also could be critiqued by Kincheloe (1995) as “benign.” On the surface at least, there was little change as a result of their projects. A closer look revealed that these teachers found the opportunity through teacher research to dialogue with the “experts” of educational research and theory and make their own conclusions about the effectiveness of various pedagogies in the classroom. Teacher research, according to this view effectively challenges the “hegemony of an exclusively university-generated knowledge base for teaching” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16) by blurring the boundaries of research and practice. No longer was educational research unresponsive to these teachers’ experiences and underused in the classroom – it had direct relevance. This was an emancipatory experience for the teacher researchers in this group. Given the current political situation of increasing standardization and deprofessionalization in teaching

along with the emphasis on "technical mastery" in teacher education and professional development (Brown & Jones, 2004, p.8), having the opportunity to ask questions about practical issues through the teacher research process made their professional development experiences more democratic.,

At the same time these teachers looked to their colleagues for help in the teacher research process. By making the study of their teaching a collaborative effort, they challenged the one teacher, one classroom model of education. The extent to which they pursued critical inquiry and made their classrooms democratic places was limited by their unwillingness to consider their marginalized students. Unlike the other teachers in the social studies cohort, these teachers did not value their student data in forming conclusions about their practice.

Regardless of their position on the continuum of critical inquiry all of the teachers were professionally affected by their teacher research projects, although to differing extents. The opportunity to engage in the exploration of personal interests was motivating and energizing to the teachers; according to Zeichner, "When teachers have the experience of action research the overwhelming majority come to the conclusion that they are on to something that matters" (1994, p. 74). For the teachers in this study the "something that matters," impacted their views of social studies teaching and learning. The projects provided a space for the teachers to negotiate their use and understanding of educational theory. In all of the teacher research projects, the teachers demonstrated their working understanding of various educational theories and how they felt they related to their teaching experiences. As a major assignment in the M.Ed. program, the teacher

research project served as a culminating event for many of the teachers – a situation in which they drew on their M.Ed. course work to make sense of the world of teaching.

### **Theoretical Understanding of Teacher Research**

The findings of this study suggest the need for a new theoretical understanding of teacher research in the educational community. Currently, literature related to teacher research presents two forms of teacher research – practical and critical. This study demonstrates that, in the teacher research process, the extent to which social studies teachers pursue critical inquiry spans a continuum. The mere act of engaging in teacher research, of asking questions, collecting data, and drawing conclusions, lends itself to critical inquiry. The experience may result in social change, democratization, and emancipation. The extent to which teachers and their students experience these results relates to the types of questions the teachers ask and their openness to change. This phenomenon is best illustrated by placing teachers along a continuum of critical inquiry.

The teacher research cycle aligns with a postmodernist framework since it provides teachers with the necessary technology to critique dominating discourses and seek alternatives to meta-narratives or “outsider knowledge.” By engaging in questioning of “outsider knowledge” during the teacher research cycles, teachers experience empowerment and emancipation. According to Brown & Jones (2001), “We (teacher researchers) want to learn to 'think critically' so that we are able then to recognize the ways in which dominant ideologies and social structures work at coercing and oppressing. (p. 18). Through teacher research, teachers, and, by extension, their students, find the opportunity to uncover and circumvent the “coercive” and “oppressive”

structures that exist in classrooms, schools, and society. Teacher research, in providing teachers the opportunity to study their own practices according to their own needs, also provides an opportunity for “complex reconceptualizations of [educational] knowledge” (Kincheloe, 1995, p. 73). By simply entering into the teacher research process and seeking to reconceptualize knowledge about schooling, teachers pursue critical inquiry to a certain extent. This leads to empowerment and emancipation for teacher researchers and their students.

This new theoretical understanding carries implications for those who would encourage pre and in-service teachers to conduct teacher research. Rather than promote teacher research based on a specific outcome, teacher research should be valued by the educational community for the multiplicity of its outcomes and implications. Just as the instructor of *Teacher as Researcher I and II* did, teacher research should be offered to teachers as a means to study their burning questions. It is artificially constraining to promote a particular form of teacher research - practical or critical teacher research. Doing so does not take into account the needs of teachers or promote their professional ability to systematically and intentionally study issues of educational importance and make decisions based on their findings. Rogers et al (1990) remind us of the opportunity teachers find in action research to make their own choices about what to study and how to change their practice as a result. They wrote:

It appears to us that what is changed through a teacher's involvement in action research is the ability to participate in the [educational research] culture, to decide what will be maintained and what will be altered. Different teachers and action research groups create different types of changes because teachers become empowered to decide what they wish to change and what they do not (p. 179).

As this study demonstrates the results and benefits of teacher research are significant and wide-ranging when teachers are given the opportunity to answer the question, “What aspect of your teaching are you passionately interested in understanding more deeply?” in whatever way they see fit.

### **The Value of Teacher Research**

Along with making sense of the world of teaching, the teacher research process brought about a variety of benefits for the participants. In the section below I explore some of the benefits evident in this study: teacher research provided professional development, affirmed and empowered teachers, created a more child-centered classroom, and led to reform and social change. I also describe how these benefits connect with the social studies and the work of educational stakeholders including educational researchers, teacher educators, and policy makers.

### **Benefits of Teacher Research to Teachers and Students**

The teacher research project affirmed and empowered teachers by giving them the opportunity to study questions of individual importance. Traditionally, educational research has been a sphere reserved for outside educators, situated away from the world of practice in higher education or research consortiums. Teacher research gave the teachers a chance to share their “insider knowledge” and demonstrate their own capability to engage in educational research and decision making. It gave them an opportunity for engagement with the larger research community. Whether by building collegial relationships or simply becoming competent in understanding educational

research and implementing it in the classroom, the members of the social studies cohort developed professionally through the teacher research process. This study echoed what Alan and Miller (1990) found when they worked with teacher researchers. In their study teacher research provided a powerful learning tool for teachers while also bringing a sense of “professionalism” in their work. They wrote, "The teachers we worked with became professionals because they were given the tools, support, and opportunity to document and demonstrate their expertise within their own classrooms, within their school communities, and finally within their professional community" (p. 201).

Unfortunately the typical professional development model involves transmitting “outsider knowledge” to teachers who are then expected to put it into practice. This has led to the so-called “theory-practice gap.” The experience of the members of the social studies cohort was different. Rather, than a one-size-fits-all professional development experience, conducting teacher research enabled these teachers to pursue questions of personal importance. Lytle and Cochran Smith (1994) write, "We have argued that teacher research is a way for teachers to come to know their own knowledge" (p. 30). For the participants of my study, teacher research was a way for the teachers to develop their own professional knowledge of social studies teaching and learning.

The benefits of knowing “their own knowledge” were shared by students. All of the teachers in this study involved their students in data collection through interviews, surveys, conversations, or analysis of student work. The teacher researchers all became “students” of their students. This transformed the position of the teachers to learners and, based on their reported results, led to more child-centered classrooms. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1994:

Teachers who are actively researching their own practices provide opportunities for their students to become similarly engaged. Researching teachers create classroom environments in which there are researching students -- students ask, not just answer questions; pose, not just solve problems; and help to construct curriculum out of their own linguistic and cultural resources, rather than just receive preselected and predigested information (p. 37).

In the case of the members of the social studies cohort, the teachers, in researching their own practice, engaged their students. This led student-centeredness and a greater awareness of effective teaching for student learning.

In some of the cases, this student-centeredness led to advocacy for marginalized students. Some of the teachers in this study described the sense of advocacy that grew as a result of their teacher research. They sought ways to help their marginalized and typically unsuccessful students succeed over the course of their research. They engaged these students in dialogue and responded to their needs. Their teacher research led to more democratic classrooms as they worked for social justice. As a result of their advocacy these teachers also confronted the hidden curriculum of their schools and the way it affected their students of color.

Along with making sense of the world of teaching, the teacher research process brought about a variety of benefits for the participants in this study and their students. Some of the most obvious benefits evident in this study included: providing professional development, affirming and empowering teachers, creating a more child-centered classroom, and reforming schools. These benefits align with the goals of the social studies including inquiry, social justice, and democratization.



## **Teacher Research and the Social Studies**

Unfortunately there has been little research conducted on teacher research in the field of social studies. According to Johnston (2005) “Action research and self-study have had little currency in social studies education” (n.p.). It is surprising that teacher research does not enjoy a more prominent position given the promotion of reflection, inquiry, and democracy in the social studies. Johnson writes that teacher research could be useful to the field of social studies in, “1) looking at social justice issues in social studies, b) using inquiry as a mode of professional development, and c) connecting democratic research processes and social studies aims” (n.p.). In this study the members of the social studies cohort met all three of these characteristics in their teacher research – some looked at social justice issues related to race and ethnicity. They all pursue inquiry to enhance their professional knowledge and they worked in concert with their colleagues and students, in a democratic manner, to answer their teacher research questions.

## **Stakeholders**

In the introduction to this study I listed various stakeholders who are interested in improving schools and teaching practice – educational researchers, teacher educators, and policy makers. Educational researchers study classroom-based phenomenon and, traditionally, formulate “best practices” for teachers to use to enhance student learning. Teacher educators help novice teachers develop inquiry and decision-making skills as well as professional knowledge in order to facilitate student learning. Policy makers determine standard curriculum for schools to follow and prescribe a variety of “high-stakes” tests in order to ensure the curriculum standards are met. This study demonstrates the value of teacher research in meeting the concerns of these stakeholders.

For educational researchers, this study pointed to the importance of giving teachers the opportunity to explore their own “best practices” through teacher research. It breaks down the theory-practice gap and provides insights about effective teaching and learning. In the teacher research conducted by the social studies cohort the teachers mediated their understanding of educational research and theory by testing it out in their own classrooms. For example Mandy, explored the theory of multiple intelligences and ways to employ it in her advanced placement classes. This led her to develop a better understanding of the theories’ usefulness in social studies teaching and learning. Outside educational researchers can learn from her teacher research too; she pointed out experiences where the theory worked and failed and demonstrated the need for more research related to differentiating in gifted classrooms.

This study also provides evidenced of the value of the teacher research experience in teacher education. Teacher educators are interested in enhancing pre and in-service teachers’ understanding of effective teaching and learning while also helping them to develop confidence and efficacy in the classroom. For the members of the social studies cohort engaging in teacher research provided an opportunity to explore connections between theory and practice. It allowed these teachers the ability to study and improve their own practice. For instance, Zach sought a method to efficiently teach current events and get his students attention at the beginning of class. Through teacher research he implemented and evaluated a new strategy - using of political cartoons.

Policy makers concerned with improving the overall quality of education have often turned to high-stakes testing and standardization. The teacher research experience of the members of the social studies cohort pointed out that teachers, when given the

opportunity, were deeply interested in improving their practice and helping students learn. In the cases where the teacher researchers focused on marginalized students, their research led to an understanding that more was at stake than test scores. Erin and Evan, for instance, confronted the hidden curriculum at work in their schools which hindered their students' success. With this in mind they implemented and reflected on various strategies to overcome these obstacles. By providing teachers opportunities to engage in teacher research, policy makers will reverse a negative trend toward deprofessionalizing teaching. At the same time, teacher research will provide "insider" knowledge for policy makers about how to best meet student needs and help all students succeed.

Educational stakeholders including educational researchers, teacher educators, and policy makers are all interested in what happens when teachers answer the question, "What aspect of your teaching are you passionately interested in understanding more deeply?" The ways teachers answer this question demonstrate their immediate concerns as well as their understanding of effective teaching for learning. Stakeholders should encourage and support teacher research since a variety of potential benefits could result in the process – professional development, affirmation and empowerment of teachers, child-centeredness in the classroom, reform and social change.

### **Future Research**

While this study provides evidence to support a new theoretical understanding of teacher research based on the experiences of a cohort of social studies teachers, there is still much to be learned about teacher research. One way to extend this study would be to consider their students in more detail to determine whether the teacher research

experience translates into real gains for the students. Another option may be to follow-up with the teacher researchers over time in a longitudinal manner. The interviews occurred in the semester after the teacher research was completed. An obvious next question would be to consider the longer term implications of teacher research on their practice.

The data I present in this study represents just one of many possible stories that could result from this study. There are additional threads in the data that I would like to write more about. For the purposes of my current study I examined the extent to which the social studies teachers pursued critical inquiry. The data also provides evidence of teacher-student dialogue, a disposition for further teacher research, the role of social studies content, and the relationship between the teacher researchers and their school. Teachers in this study appeared to more openly talk to their students. Most of the teachers reported having “ah-ha” moments as a result of their conversations with their students. In addition their transition to a role of “student” of their students changed the dynamic in the classroom. Kim for instance reported the “closeness” she felt with her students as a result of the teacher research project. I’d like to return to my data to uncover the themes that correspond with dialogue between teachers and their students.

All of the teachers in this study were a part of the social studies cohort and self-identified as social studies teachers, yet only a small minority of the projects actually dealt directly with social studies. None of the topics dealt with content knowledge and only a few looked at pedagogy specific to social studies– the use of political cartoons, for instance. I think it is important to explore the connection between content and teacher

research to learn more about the teacher research experience and ways to support teacher research.

Finally, a phenomenon that occurred in the interviews but I wasn't able to explore further in this study, is what happens to the teachers after their research experience. Many of the teachers told me in the interviews that they would like to continue their teacher research in the future. At the same time, several times teachers expressed frustration with their inability to implement changes in their schools or classrooms based on the insights they had gained in the teacher research process. Tyler talked about his "idealism" at the beginning of the year and his plans for being a "different type" of department head. This, he reported, was quashed by the administration at his school. This experience would be of interest to both teacher educators and administrators. It appears that although Tyler was eager to change and improve practice, his situation at his school overpowered this idealism.

### **Post Script**

After this study was conducted I joined Erin and Evan to present their teacher research at the state social studies conference. Erin concluded her talk by stating, "My action research did not prove anything amazing. It just pointed out that caring for kids matters." What Erin learned impacted her and her students' experiences in palpable ways. She grew in the research process and has gone on to share her findings. She says she is more "confident" and this is evident in her interest in pursuing National Board Certification and presenting her findings at both the state and national social studies conferences.

I was present when Erin and the other 13 teachers in the social studies cohort presented their research. It was exciting to see these experienced social studies teachers come alive as they recounted their teacher research experiences and what they had learned in the process. By formalizing my interest in their experience, I have collected data to confirm my initial reaction. For all of the teachers, not just Erin, the teacher research projects added depth to their graduate work. Some experienced more profound results than others but they all had the opportunity to finally explore the questions they had always wanted to answer.

It was an ambitious goal, to develop a new theoretical understanding of teacher research. Nonetheless, the current literature on teacher research did not adequately reflect the nuances in the teacher research experiences for the members of the social studies cohort. Their projects ranged along a continuum of critical inquiry and their research provided many benefits to them and their students. Their experiences also pointed to the importance of the continued promotion of teacher research in the social studies and in educational research in general.

## **Appendix A: Interview Guide for Teacher Researchers**

Research Question: Through the teacher research experience, to what extent did teachers pursue critical inquiry into classroom practices?

### Impressions of teacher research:

How would you define “teacher research”? What do you feel the purposes of it are?

How did you feel when you were first told about the assignment? Did your feelings change over the course of your research?

### Logistical questions about conducting the research and creating the product:

How did you pick your topic? How did you choose your subject of study? What were your intentions? What were the outcomes?

What background reading did you do?

Were any MEd course texts or experiences useful in framing your research question(s), analyzing the data you collected, or making conclusions?

How did you collect data? What research methods did you use? Why did you use the methods you chose?

To what extent were your students involved in the research process? Explain.

Did anyone contribute to your teacher research project (e.g. colleagues, classmates, students, other)? Who? How did they contribute?

### Post evaluation of experience:

Looking back, how do you feel about the process of teacher research?

Did teacher research impact any aspect of your teaching philosophy or teaching practices?

How did the teacher research course compare to other courses you’ve taken or professional development projects?

Have you or do you plan to in the future continue to engage in methods or skills you used during the teacher research experience?

### Looking back on the MEd program: [revised]

Why did you decide to pursue a MEd? Why did you choose the program at UNC?

Were you surprised by any part of the program?

How would you describe the impact of the program on your practice as a teacher?

Other:

What question did I not ask that you would have liked to talk about?

What else do you think I need to know to understand better your experience with teacher research?



## **Appendix B: Interview Guide for Course Instructor**

### Impressions of teacher research:

How would you define “teacher research”?

What does a “good” teacher research project look like?

Why should teacher research be a part of a Master’s for Experienced Teachers?

Describe your goals in the *Teacher as Researcher* course.

### Post evaluation of experience:

Looking back, how do you feel about the teacher research work of the social studies cohort? Strengths/weakness?

Comment on each of the projects [see appendix C] and give your interpretation of each.

Do you plan to teach the course in the future? What if any changes to the course would you make?

### Other:

What question did I not ask that you would have liked to talk about?

What else do you think I need to know to understand better your experience with teacher research?

## **Appendix C: Teacher Research Topics and Questions by Type**

### **Issues of culture in the classroom:**

#### **1. Low achieving African American males**

“Why are African American males generally low achievers in my social studies classroom?”

#### **2. Differentiation and culturally relevant pedagogy**

“More directly, I hypothesize that implementing the tenets of culturally relevant teaching and differentiation will make learning real and tangible for students, leading to increased academic performance and a potential of ‘closing the gap.’”

#### **3. Latino students in US history**

“What if a few of the students in the class cannot speak English or have no prior life experiences in American culture? As a United States history teacher where the content drives the course and new knowledge is built on prior experiences in the country, meeting the needs of Latino students in the classroom presents a unique dilemma.”

### **Questions specific to social studies teaching:**

#### **4. Using a variety of historical sources to improve student engagement**

“I wanted to know why [my students found history to be their most boring subject].”

“Frankly, why can’t history be full of writing and self-expression, hands-on discovery, and gratifying experience?”

#### **5. Using political cartoons in social studies classroom**

“First of all, I wanted to determine how well my students could find and understand symbol that are used in political cartoons. Secondly, I hoped to find if my students were recognizing a cartoonist’s bias while examining cartoons. Lastly, I wanted to discover if the cartoons were helping my students make connections to news events that were headlines on the evening news.”

#### **6. Technology, “i-movies” and AP US history**

“So, for my action research project I set out to discover a way to connect students to history through the computer. I assigned students the task of creating a documentary on an aspect of the Civil War.”

### **General pedagogical concerns:**

#### **7. Cooperative learning**

“...I decided to try both techniques [lecture and cooperative learning throughout several lessons in my European Focus world history classes to find out which technique works best in my classroom for my students and myself.”

#### **8. Collaborative learning and inquiry-based learning**

“In spite of success on the exam, and their positive feedback, I wondered if altering my pedagogical methods [toward more student-centered] would improve the class and

student performance. Would it deepen student interest, engagement and understanding in history?"

9. Connection between perceived effort and success

"Do students make connections between effort and success on tests? What happens when students make strong connections between effort and success? What skills do students need to achieve effective effort and thereby improve their test scores?"

10. Plagiarism

"Since I continue to encounter plagiarized passages and papers, I decided that I needed to research methods to incorporate into my classroom that will prevent students from unintentionally plagiarizing."

11. Improving communication between students and teacher

"Therefore, when given the opportunity to conduct research in my class I knew right away that I wanted to find ways to enhance the communication between me and my students so I could get their ideas, attitudes, and opinions about my teaching and their learning."

12. Lessons based on multiple intelligences

"What happens to student learning in an AP class when I incorporate other subjects and lessons centered on the Multiple Intelligences to enhance student learning beyond the traditional lecture and daily discussion?"

13. Cooperative learning and student comprehension/understanding

"How is learning affected when students prepare chapter lessons in cooperative learning groups and then teach those to their peers?"

14. Modifications for exceptional children (EC) with Individual Education Plans (IEP)

"Which modifications are valid? Which ones, in my opinion, do not work and hinder student's progress?"

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