Connecting to the Bigger Picture: The Inclusion of Social History Within
Ontario Secondary Schools to Foster Critical Thinking & Engagement in Students

By

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Abstract

This study comes from a desire to truly understand how the Ontario secondary school curriculum teaches history in the twenty-first century. Research looks at the inclusion of social history, or lack thereof, by teachers into their history classrooms, in combination with the “grand narrative”, or general perspective of content that is required of every secondary school history course. Within this particular research, the three primary facets of history education – the curriculum itself, the textbooks, and the teachers – were studied in an effort to see if there is any correlation between an inclusion of social history, and students’ critical thinking abilities and levels of engagement. It examined the documents to see if social history is included at the highest levels – the curriculum and the designated textbooks – and if so, whether or not teachers carry this inclusion down into their own lessons and practice. Research was qualitative, and consisted of interviews with two secondary school history teachers who teach within all levels of the history curriculum. The study examined teachers’ reasons for including or excluding social history from their lessons, and delve even deeper to determine what impact these teachers feel social history has on their students’ learning and engagement, positive or negative. Perhaps most importantly, this study aims to determine whether including social history in the classroom fosters students’ critical thinking abilities and serves to engage students in their studies.

**Keywords:** social history, microhistory, critical thinking, student engagement, secondary school
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Chapter One: Introduction

The Problem

Before we begin, it is essential to clarify what exactly is meant when I discuss “social history” and its connection to critical thinking and student engagement. In researching this topic and the history of social history, I find that Jürgen Kocka (2003) summarized the field best, writing that

social history is a specialized sub-discipline concentrating on social structures, processes, and actions in a specific sense (inequality, mobility, classes, strata, ethnicity, gender relations, urbanization, work and life of different types of people, not just elites), in contrast to other sub-disciplines like economic history, constitutional history or the history of ideas (page 21).

Though the study of history within post-secondary education is now often localized in this sub-discipline, and students and professors are together exploring a myriad of different topics and perspectives, sadly the same is often not true of the history being taught in our secondary schools. For the most part, many secondary school history classes focus on only the main events within history, and those prominent figures that were involved in them; while some teachers do branch out and discuss different perspectives, many more seem to have adopted a “teach to the test” (Phelps, 2011, page 38) mentality when it comes to deciding what to teach and what to leave out for the year. While this problem of teaching what students will need to pass their exams is more persistent in the United States, where content standards are linked to standardized testing (Phelps, 2011, page 38), I have heard many personal accounts – from students and teachers alike – of feeling that the curriculum is very narrow in its scope, and as such history is not a creative class, it is boring, there is no instructional time that is not tightly scheduled, and so on. Even throughout my own schooling, I recall often hearing such lines as “we have to move on now,
there’s so much left to cover,” right in the middle of a heated debate, or “no, we will not be covering that topic, there’s too much else to get through!”

However, is it truly just the fault of the curriculum, or is there more to the problem? In looking at the textbooks that are written for Ontario history classes, we see further evidence of why the classes may be lacking in engagement for students, and social history as a discipline. They are written to largely reflect the tale woven by the “grand narrative,” or as Roland Barthes calls it, ‘referential illusion,’ which believes that the way things are told is simply the way things were (Wineburg, 2001, page 11). The textbooks used by Ontario secondary school students tend to focus on the one main perspective – that of the white, European, privileged male. Any social history inclusion by the authors is usually confined to a small section of the overall chapter, and is usually only mentioned if the minority group involved played a part in or was majorly impacted by a decision the privileged group made. The life of the everyday, average Canadian and their history is something there just is not time for; if teachers stick to just what the textbook provides, they have a bit of social historical information that they can discuss and introduce, but the focus will be on that “grand narrative.” Of course, this is not to say that the curriculum and the textbooks are the only reason social history may not be taught, either. Teachers play a large role in what their students will learn throughout the year – if a teacher feels that social history is not something students need to learn, then they will not learn it; some teachers do feel that this is not the ‘important’ history that students must know, and may actively or unconsciously choose not to address topics of social history. All together, there are many potential obstacles in the way of students learning and interacting with social history, and yet this is the history that may be much more representative of them as individuals, as members of groups and communities, and as a part of Canada and its history. If researchers in the field of history are finally free to study what
they find engaging, and actively research what is most important to them, why are we denying our students the same joys that a history class could provide for them?

Student engagement is another key problem that has been observed in Ontario secondary school history classrooms. Only one history credit is required for Ontario students to graduate – a single Grade 10 Canadian history credit. Unfortunately, this tends to be the only exposure to high school history that most students have. Senior enrollment in history classes tends to not be very high, and sadly this means that most schools will not offer all of the potential history courses present in the curriculum. According to a recent study out of the U.K. by Haydn and Harris (2010), only 29% of 15-year-old students believed that history was a useful topic to study (page 242). Furthermore, some of the answers students gave as to why they felt it was not important to study history are quite shocking. Many talked about its irrelevance – “I don’t think history is really that important because it’s just storing information that has already happened and won’t help me in my future life (page 249); how boring it is – “I don’t think we need it, yeah it’s OK for but that is it. (I think they make it to bore us all out of our brains,” (page 250); and some just really did not care – “I don’t know, but it helps you on quiz shows and pub quizzes,” (page 250). Though Haydn and Harris’ study only addresses the perceptions that British high school pupils have of their mandatory history classes, and whether history should be a mandatory subject or not, it is possible to further analyze their conclusions for the purposes of this study.

While this study does focus on history classes in the United Kingdom, we can see parallels in Canada. In Ontario, students are only required to take one history credit in Grade 10 to graduate – Canadian history; after that point, any history taken is completely optional. In looking at the Ontario curriculum documents, most of the senior level history courses focus on non-national history (American and European). There is a senior level Canadian history course
within the curriculum – most schools do not have enough interested students to teach it every year. Perhaps the answer to this problem is not to debate whether history should be mandatory or not at the high school level, as the Haydn & Harris study explored, but rather a different sort of question: Why are we not teaching students history that is more relevant to them, or including aspects of it to engage them in a class where their own voices have gone ignored for so long? I feel that if more teachers included a greater amount of social history in their classes would address the very issues emphasized by Haydn and Harris (above) – irrelevance, boredom, and indifference. If students were to learn more about themselves and the roles of people like them in history, I believe they would become far more engaged with the material and the subject, have greater cause to think critically about issues that have actually impacted them, and become more excited about history than they ever have been before. The minimization of social history within all levels – curriculum, textbook, and teacher – of the Ontario secondary school history course structure is the inherent problem that this research problem will address and investigate.

**Introduction to the Research Study**

In the Ontario secondary school history curriculum, personal connections between the material covered and the students are often lost or never made. As the previous section to this study emphasizes, there are many potential reasons for this that I hope to uncover and explore. As Sam Wineburg (2006) writes, “Historical narrative is no longer restricted to great acts of statecraft by now encompasses everyday acts like childbirth and the daily routines of ordinary people trying to make ends meet (page 12). Within the last half-century, the study of history has become more personal and centred on average people, their lives, and how the connect to the “grand narrative” of history that people first become familiar with in school. Historians are now more focused on the history of the individual or group, and their connection to and impact on the
general history of a nation, whereas before the focus was on only the most important of individuals, such as Prime Ministers and leaders of revolutions, and the major events within a nation. For example, one of the major topics taught in any Canadian history classroom is World War II – the key battles, the alliances made, the major events, and the primary leaders of the war – figures like Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill. In a classroom where the teacher employs a social history lens, all of these important facts would still be covered; however, students would also learn additional content, which they may find more relevant. They could discuss women and girls during the war, and their changing roles; minority students may learn about the treatment of immigrant groups and their wartime contributions; teenaged boys would learn about their wartime counterparts, many of whom fought and died for their country. Students get to learn about their Canadian history, not just the history of Canada.

This study aims to explore this gap between what the historical field is currently focusing on, and what is being taught to secondary school students within Ontario. In looking at the three key components of teaching history in Ontario – the provided curriculum, the assigned textbooks, and the teachers themselves – this study will look at the perceived importance of social history as presented by those which teach history to secondary school students. It will examine the importance of social history as a means of personalizing history, connecting students to the “grand narrative,” and getting them to think critically about history. The study delves into this triangulation of social history, critical thinking, and student engagement, and examines the relationships and connection between them. Specifically, this study will look at whether teachers incorporate social history into their lessons, how they include it in their lessons, and most importantly, what effects – positive or negative – including it has on students’ critical thinking and engagement with the material.
The Purpose of the Research Study

For the purposes of this study, the terms “social history” and “grand narrative” must be clarified, so that there is no confusion as to what the study is exploring. For this researcher in particular, the term social history will be used to refer to a history that focuses on the everyday lives of ordinary people, and how their experiences tie in to a bigger picture. On the other hand, the term “grand narrative” refers to the more traditional approach towards teaching history, where the focus is on what have already been deemed significant events and prominent and important historical figures. Using these terms, the purpose of this particular study is to therefore answer the following research question: In what ways and for what purposes do Ontario secondary school teachers include social history as an integral aid to foster the critical thinking skills of their students, and further engage them in the history curriculum? In the process of trying to answer this question and better understand what it is like to teach history in an Ontario secondary school, many sub questions will also be asked and further discussed. For example, are there any limitations in trying to incorporate a more social perspective of history? What stops teachers from attempting to teach social history – is it really the curriculum or the textbook, or is there more to it? In what ways are social history, critical thinking, and student engagement intertwined? Can using social history help students to better understand and connect to the past? Are there actually any benefits for teachers or students in using this type of history in the classroom? These are just a few of the additional questions that will help in establishing a concrete focus for this research study and aid in coming up with a solid conclusion.

This study will focus on the teachers’ experiences in teaching history in their classrooms over the years, their decisions regarding whether or not to teach social history, and the way in which these decisions have impacted their classroom and the students. There is a duality in this
research study that will be examined: if teachers do not use social history, I plan to examine the reasons why and the way in which their classrooms function; if teachers do include social history in the curriculum, I hope to inquire as to its effect on students, and whether or not any visible changes in their critical thinking or engagement levels exists. This will require not only detailed information regarding what teachers do in their practice and why, but also some reflection on their part, regarding what they see in their students and their learning. Unfortunately, as this is a qualitative study and the sole method of research is interviews, the results of this study will not be generalizable. Despite this limitation, I believe that this information will still provide other researchers with valuable knowledge on how social history is and can be included in history curriculums and classrooms across Canada, and all around the world.

Background of the Researcher

The concept of social history and its role within the grand narrative has always been one of great interest and importance to me. Having studied history extensively in my undergraduate degree, I noticed that the way it was approached by my professors was drastically different from how I had been taught by many of my elementary and secondary school teachers; the main thing I noticed was that it was infinitely more enjoyable. While I had a couple of very enjoyable and memorable history classes in my high school years, there were also many teachers who focused on things I cared nothing about – who won what battle, what explorer discovered what, and which Prime Minister ran Canada at which time are just a few examples. While I do not deny that these are important facts to know, I did not feel as if any of it was relevant to me, and I did not understand why I had to spend so much time learning about it. I have always been fascinated by history and had a passion for learning about it on my own, but after the majority of my pre-university experiences were so dull I never even considered studying history at a post-secondary
level. I had learned all of the facts I needed to know in elementary and secondary school, I did not think that history would be structured differently at a higher level, and I did not see the point in studying it any further. Much like the students from the U.K. Haydn and Harris (2010) studied, I was bored of history class. Two of my secondary teachers were wonderfully innovative, but based on my total experience before university I felt like I had learned the whole story and knew all about history. What more could there possibly be to learn?

In my naïveté, it was years after graduating from secondary school before I picked up an academic interest in history again. I needed to take an elective course in the Humanities that was not in my field of study, English Literature, and there was an interesting-looking survey course on Western European history being offered that semester. It was a first-year course, and I was already in my third year; based on what I already knew, I felt it would be an easy grade, and that there might just be some new content to cover. I registered for the course, and attended my first few classes and tutorials; the experience was enlightening, and completely different from what I remembered history class to be like. While we covered the grand narrative yet again in the lecture hour, we also had tutorials once a week, where we extensively examined a variety of primary and secondary sources, and discussed how the lives of ordinary people were shaped and reflective of the major movements and events of the grand narrative. I found this approach to history so intriguing and eye-opening that I decided to turn my major in English Literature into a double major in English and History. In doing this, I took a wide variety of courses, about all types of people during all historical periods, and learned more about different perspectives and the ordinary person than I ever thought possible. University classes made the average person special and integral to the rich tapestry that is history, and I felt the need to convey this message
to others. I had known since I was about twelve years old that I wanted to become a high school teacher – as a history teacher, I could try and do just this.

The one thing I noticed in university was that despite how different the history courses themselves were, they all had one thing in common – professors combined primary sources and social history with academic secondary sources and the grand narrative to create a more complex and complete picture. Upon my convocation and getting accepted into this Master’s program, I realized that not only did I love this in-depth approach to history, but that as a history teacher I could employ it myself. I pondered over why I had not gotten such a multifaceted picture from all of my history teachers in the past, and why only some of my teachers taught us about more than just the main historical storyline. In completing my teaching placements, I met teachers that included social history into their classrooms, and I was able to aid them in doing it in my own lessons; I saw firsthand that my students seemed to enjoy what I was doing, and while my novice attempts at teaching history went well, I also saw that there was much more that could be done. This has all led me to wanting to know what approaches, if any, other teachers take to include social history in their classrooms, how effective or ineffective they find it, and if it truly does allow for increased student engagement and critical thinking.

**Overview**

In Chapter One, I have addressed the primary research problem that will be addressed and investigated throughout this proposal. I have also introduced the sub questions, the triangulation of social history, critical thinking, and student engagement that will be explored within this study, and the three primary aspects of the problem – the curriculum, the textbooks, and the teachers. I have also introduced myself as the sole researcher for this project, my
background, and my interests and reasons for conducting this study. Chapter Two looks into the literature and bodies of work that address key aspects of this research question, and gives readers insight into the worlds of social history, critical thinking, student engagement, and how this all connects to education. The literature review is broken down into several smaller categories, one for each major subtopic within this project. The first section is on the history of social history, and its current status within the discipline. The second section focuses on the changing attitudes of critical thinking, and its prominence in education today. Finally, the last section looks into the small but essential body of literature that discusses social history and critical thinking, and how they work together. The final section also includes literature on student engagement, so that readers can see just how essential, and often how lacking, it is at the secondary school level.

Chapter Three examines the methodology of this qualitative study, and exposes all the nuances and details taken in conducting this research. It discusses the qualities I searched for in participants, how participants were recruited, how data was gathered, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, and what was done with all of this information. Chapter Four consists of the topics and themes that came up in the interviews, and fleshes out all of the patterns and information that was discovered in the interviewing process. Finally, Chapter Five consists of the findings made as a result of the research conducted, and establishes the conclusions made in executing and completing this research project.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

In dealing with this particular research question, there are several components of the question that must first be addressed and clarified. Social history is a field in which any topic or theme can be discussed at great length, and from several different angles. It is also a topic where opinions and perspectives on its legitimacy and significance within the field of history and as an important aspect of study are frequently debated by historians and other scholars everywhere. It is a field that has drastically changed since it first really came to prominence in North America during the 1960s, and has faced great stigma and pressure from the historical discipline to conform to the style already in place. For the purpose of this study, this literature review will attempt to find or create a uniform definition of what exactly social history is, as well as explore its significance within the historiography. In discussing social history, this review will also define what many historians call the grand narrative of history, and elaborate on how these two seemingly distinct subsets of the larger field are complimentary and connected in various ways.

To fully comprehend just what is being asked by the research question in this study, I must also elaborate on what is meant by the term “critical thinking,” and its importance within the education system. The literature also shows a general shift in how critical thinking is now perceived within education and how scholars in the field are trying to shape the way teachers expect critical thinking to ‘work’. There is a great body of literature on what critical thinking is; how teachers should foster and encourage critical thinking in all subjects and at any grade level; and on why critical thinking is such an important skill for students to learn.
The third body of literature used to support this study deals specifically with fostering and enhancing students’ critical thinking skills within history courses and classrooms. Certain early works, such as Provus’ (1955) “Teaching Critical Thinking Through History,” set the stage for debates on the usefulness of critical thinking skills, and how “most educators believe that the social studies teacher should bear part of the responsibility for the training job,” (page 393). However, despite this early declaration that students need to know how to think critically, according to Norris (1988) “the teaching of critical thinking, long held an important goal of education, is finally being taken seriously in schools, colleges, and universities,” (page 125). Ironically, despite the fact that Norris’ study is almost thirty years old, there is still a long way to go before all students are taught to think critically in all classes. At the history level, critical thinking is present in curriculum documents – but there needs to be more, and a greater focus. Despite the concept of critical thinking now being taken seriously by teachers of all levels, there has been a great deal of research into how to implement and foster critical thinking through various history courses and curricula. Many of these articles provide useful tips and suggestions for educators on how to use social history as a tool to aid in critical thinking, which will be very useful in setting up my own study and choosing appropriate sub-questions to ask research participants. This last section of literature, though smaller than the other two, is of the utmost importance because these scholars do attempt to combine social history and critical thinking together as a combined field of study and research. My own research hopes to do the same as this last body of literature – combining social history and critical thinking – using both their works and my gathered data and conclusions.

While I have not found much research in the way of student engagement specifically linked to history classes, there is also a decent body of literature on student engagement which
informs this research study. It examines what keeps students engaged, how classrooms appear when students are actually interested in what they are learning, and why/what keeps students from being engaged in school. In regards to what engaged students look like specifically within the history classroom, this research paper will rely on the observations and answers given by the participants of the study, who will be asked to speak on student engagement within history classes.

This literature review will focus on these main topics, the bodies of work each topic contains, and the support and limitations that each provides this specific research question. Under the theoretical lens of social constructivism, these articles will help me to generate a universal and shared meaning for these concepts of social history, critical thinking, and student engagement, as well as provide solid evidence to support my notion that all three are explicitly linked, and that they should be further used and connected within the Ontario educational context to support and strengthen one another. More specifically, using the literature from these fields I aim to discuss and show through my own research that what I and other researchers call “social history” can and should be included more thoroughly in Canadian secondary school history classrooms to engage students and foster their critical thinking skills.

**What is Social History, and Where Does it Come From?**

The notion of “social history” is a fairly new one within the study of history itself, and more often than not when one hears the term it is laden with presuppositions and assumptions regarding what the author means by the term. As Sewell (2009) summarizes, many of the first scholars in the field gave definitions that were uninformative – like Stearns (1967) who said “the essence of social history is the description and explanation of styles of life,” (page 5) – or
tautological like Conze (1967), who wrote that “social history means the history of society, or, more precisely, of social structures, processes, and trends,” (page 7) (Sewell, 2009, page 38). These definitions are reminiscent of a time where social history was just starting out as a field of research, and as such the terminology had not yet been solidified or even clarified. What did Stearns mean by ‘styles of life’? Is the history of society not just basic history? One of the earliest definitions that I feel is most applicable to the field as it currently stands comes from Eric Hobsbawm’s essay “From Social History to the History of Society,” (1971), in which he explains that “social history can never be another specialization like economic or other hyphenated histories because its subject matter cannot be isolated” (page 24). The focus for Hobsbawm was not one particular field, but the interplay and connections between all fields of historical study (Smith, 2003, page 165). Though Hobsbawm actually turned away from the term ‘social history’ with this essay and instead used ‘history of society,’ I feel that he was on the right track in attempting to clarify what exactly is meant in using this term. Social history cannot be isolated, for it is the study of all of these historical specializations combined, as a means of creating a more complete picture of history itself.

As mentioned, social history is a fairly new field within the study of history. Over the decades since scholars’ interests in the field was first piqued the field has changed dramatically, and its scholarly goals and aims have been shaped and developed by those who have contributed to its evolution. In “Social History Present and Future,” Searns (2003) provides a succinct summary of the formation of social history has a valid and valuable field. He begins with the origins of social history during the 1960s in the United States, and the fight that social historians faced trying to establish themselves in a field that did not take kindly to new research and approaches that failed to conform to the old. Moving through the 1970s and 1980s, educators and
scholars became more willing to embrace this new field, though many were still uncertain of what subjects and methods were involved. At this time there were still some more conservative historians who believed that social history was ruining the purpose of ‘real’ history, which was to uplift the youth and public through stories of heroic action and political ideals. These notions continued on through to the end of the twentieth century, and though social history has not realized its brash early hopes, it has been transformative in itself, and to the study of history in general (Searns, 2003, page 9). Szijarto (2002) writes that “modern social history has placed the experience of real human beings to the centre of its attention,” (page 210). The focus in recent years has been on people, their lives, and the human experience, in light of what is going on around them – it is a means to connect the individual to the bigger picture. More importantly, Szijarto elaborates that social history focuses on ‘real’ people – not necessarily famous figures like John A. Macdonald or Louis Riel – on the average person, the farmer and the teenaged industrial factory worker, with whom the average reader and student can feel a much realer connection. Social history has also become popularized in recent years through the surge in success of biographies and memoirs, which aim to tell us something about the larger historical events through the particular lens of a certain person, group of people, or location (Szijarto, page 212).

This ‘real’ history of which I write in this literature review is known to many scholars and students of history as the “grand narrative.” This narrative is the history that students read about in history textbooks – the tales of, to quote Searns (2003) heroic actions and political ideals. This is also the particular branch of history that the general population tends to have knowledge of, or have learned through schooling at some point – it focuses on pivotal events in a nation’s history, important historical figures, and general trends in economics, politics,
population, and culture, to name a few. As Magnusson (2006) emphasizes, “The grand narrative monopolizes all the attention, since academic tradition lays down as a condition that without such greater historical connections the research [which social history does] becomes incomprehensible” (page 907). A major supporter of the realignment of historical ideology and reassessment of historical scholarship (page 905), Magnusson writes on to say that many prominent scholars within the discipline of history have gone on to reject this idea of the ‘grand narrative’. They prefer the microhistory method instead because of the opportunity it gives for researchers to “break away from the shackles of the grand narrative and approach the research material free from the constraints of any predetermined scholarly conception of what is significant and what is not, and where the difference lies” (2006, p. 907). Social/microhistory allows researchers to be free to study what they find interesting and significant.

In more recent years, several terms have popped up to describe this particular field of history. While the term social history is still in use, some scholars have also chosen to use ‘microhistory’ or ‘local history’ in its place, though the terms do seem to be largely synonymous in most articles. The word choice is seemingly more of the author’s personal preference than to serve any particular distinction in meaning between them. I have chosen to use the term ‘social history’ despite other synonymous choices because to me it is the most representative and inclusive of the style of history teaching I am looking at in my data collection – namely, the history of societies and the more social aspects of a certain period of time and/or group of people. The terms ‘microhistory’ and ‘local history’ both sound too specific and localized for my particular research interests. ‘Social history’, on the other hand, is a much broader term which to me focuses on the general history – and any aspect of history – of average and ordinary people. It is a type of history that aims to help people better understand the bigger picture, rather than give
more insight into specific details; it is a history that gives scholars and students a better feel of what life was like for the majority of the population, which is something that the traditional and typically-taught ‘grand narrative’ usually does not do.

In both the Revised Grade 9/10 (2013) and Revised Grade 11/12 (2005) curriculum documents provided by the Ministry of Education, it is clear to see that history teachers are meant to expose their students to both the ‘grand narrative’ and the more social aspects of whichever history course they are taking. In doing a quick online search of both curriculum documents, the word social appears well over 200 times within both. While the word obviously has several different meanings that change based upon the context in which it is being used, a more detailed examination of each curriculum document shows that focus is being given within what is expected – of teachers to teach and students to show knowledge of – to the history of the general populace and their lives as well as major events and figures of history. As one example, in the Grade 12 World History: The West and the World University preparation course (herein referred to as CHY4U), the areas or strands of study listed in the document are called “Communities: Local, National, Global,” “Change and Continuity,” “Citizenship and Heritage,” “Social, Economic, and Political Structures,” and “Methods of Historical Inquiry and Communication,” (Ministry of Education, 2005, pages 194, 196, 198, 200, & 202). Though each of these topics will require discussion of important figures of the time and major historical events, clear room is given to discuss the average person. In the first strand, which focuses on communities, you would have room to discuss members of those communities, and how that community affected their lives. In speaking of social structures, a teacher could examine how members within a caste system were affected based on what caste they belonged to. Even in politics, a teacher could focus on victims of a revolution as well as the victors.
Furthermore, within the specific expectations given for the different strands of CHY4U it becomes clear that the focus is on the lives of average people, with criteria such as “students will analyze the impact of Western colonization on both the colonizer and the colonized,” [emphasis mine]” (2005, page 194), and “students will describe a variety of forms of human servitude,” (page 199). With topics such as these, it would be imperative for teachers to discuss the average men and women of history – those various African tribes who were colonized during the Scramble for Africa; men and women who were employed as butlers, valets, and housekeepers to the wealthy nobility of Europe; French peasants who were serfs and labourers for their seigneur; and so on. In focusing on these non-traditional voices of history, the Ontario curriculum successfully exposes students to a more realistic portrayal of history than what they may have previously learned. It also shows our increasingly diverse classrooms what it was like to be a non-White male throughout various time periods, by exploring the histories of many different social classes, ethnic backgrounds, and even genders.

**What Do We Mean by Critical Thinking, and Why is It Important?**

‘What’ we teach (content) is often considered the most important part of teaching history. As the prior section suggests, incorporating more social history is a great way to get students engaged in history. However, content is not the only factor when it comes to engaging students and getting them thinking critically. The approach is equally important – how we go about teaching history is just as essential as what we are teaching. Often, when the term “critical thinking” is used, educators and scholars tend to think of Harold Bloom’s (1956) Taxonomy of Higher Order Thinking Skills (Appendix C, Fig. 1). Though this taxonomy is now over fifty years old, it is still seen by many educators as an appropriate way to approach critical thinking in the curriculum. Bloom’s taxonomy is referred to as a “knowledge hierarchy” by modern
scholars, and outlines that evaluation and synthesis are ranked as the most important and intellectually-oriented thinking skills for students to have, but are also considered to be the hardest to obtain and master (Gini-Newman, 2013, lectures). The structure of Bloom’s taxonomy is laid out as a series of levels or steps that students must work towards in order to achieve competence in what is called higher order thinking skills. If they can become adept and master lower order thinking skills, such as content knowledge or comprehension, they can eventually become critical thinking experts. As Roland Case (2013) writes, “The sequenced levels of thinking articulated in Bloom’s original taxonomy is the most widely known list in education. In addition to enduring popularity, it is arguably one of the most destructive theories of education,” (page 196). For decades, researchers and educators have followed Bloom’s hierarchy under the belief that students are only capable of critical thinking once they have proven their knowledge and worked their way up from the bottom of Bloom’s thinking taxonomy up to the top tiers.

However, this was not meant to be the purpose of Bloom’s Taxonomy at all. Rather, the pyramid was meant to be seen as a guide or framework for assessing and classifying learning outcomes; when there is a more encompassing ‘higher order’ outcome that is being assessed, it is unnecessary to assess for a ‘lower order’ outcome (Case, 2013, p. 196). In other words, if students are showing that they are capable of thinking critically about an issue, and are able to evaluate, synthesize, and analyze the information, it can be assumed that they also have the knowledge and comprehension skills necessary for critical thinking. Logically, this does make a great deal of sense – one who can answer the more complex questions asked of them can probably also complete those tasks deemed simpler and answer basic factual recollection questions on the same subject. If we make assumptions such as this, as many people do, why is it that so many seem to think that critical thinking needs to be worked up to, rather than just taught
from the start? If the original intent behind Bloom’s taxonomy was that educators can assume students are capable of ‘lower order’ thinking if they are being assessed for ‘higher order’ thinking, how is it that many modern educators still have it all backwards? Why do we require students to complete knowledge and comprehension-oriented tasks before we even introduce them to critical thinking? This is because we have “distorted the theory without appreciating the implications” (Case, 2013, page 196). Rather than starting with the hardest tasks and seeing what our students are capable of, we have altered the way learning is approached in schools so that students have to work their way up, proving they have become masters of each lower step before they are finally allowed to start thinking critically. This application of Bloom’s taxonomy has had a number of serious ramifications within the classroom and for our students: it has lowered the expectations for thinking; encouraged the transmission of information; and creates false confidence (Case, 2013, page 197-199). All of these flaws have greatly impacted and limited the potential for critical thinking with today’s students, and severely hindered their abilities. However, rather than using this popular yet functionally incorrect version of Bloom’s taxonomy, many researchers and educators have suggested alternative methods to promote critical thinking, such as changing the difficulty levels of questions and encouraging students to give reasoned judgments for their answers (Case, 2013, page 200).

If students are expected to think critically right from the start, and as educators we set the stage so that students are encouraged to think critically at all times, it only makes sense that they will also learn about and use what Bloom called ‘lower order’ thinking tasks in the process of thinking critically. Critical thinking may be more challenging at the start, especially if students are not used to thinking in this way and are coming from Taxonomy-heavy classrooms. However, it can be done, and sooner or later each and every student will start to think deeply and
critically, and engage in critical inquiry (Gini-Newman, 2013, lectures). Back when Bloom was constructing his taxonomy in the late 1950s it was clear, straightforward, and popular, and it aided teachers of all subjects in the most important part of their jobs: teaching students to think (Wineburg and Schneider, 2010, page 56-57). Though it may have been corrupted and misunderstood as time went on, it is not too late for educators and researchers to realize that this is so, and to revitalize the notion of critical thinking as Bloom first imagined it – as evidence that lower order thinking assessments were not needed if students were showing they were capable of so much more.

Just as educators have started to realize that critical thinking can be done at all stages of learning, researchers have realized that the critical thinking process may not be as hierarchical as was once thought. As many recent scholars have pointed out, critical thinking should not be perceived as a process where certain types of thinking are better than others, and that all other steps must be demonstrated before critical thinking can happen. Instead of focusing on these types of ‘knowledge hierarchies’ – where certain skills are more valued than others based on their ‘difficulty’ – we should be focusing on what David Weinberger (2011) terms ‘knowledge networks’. In a knowledge network, everything is connected to critical thinking, and everything is of equal importance. As Fig. 2 (Appendix C) shows, the current theory regarding critical thinking and inquiry states that there are four components of critical thinking: share, construct, investigate, and reflect. These four are interconnected, but they also build the foundations which lead to asking engaging and relevant questions. This foundation, within the confines of this research study, takes the shape of a series of pillars that lead to engaged and critically thinking students. If we, as history educators, want our students to think critically and be engaged in our classes, we must focus on three things: content must be relevant; the approach must be active;
and students must be challenged. This interpretation of Weinberger’s “knowledge networks” as a series of pillars completely transforms the approach used in teaching history classes, just as incorporating social history transforms the content being taught. This is a revolutionary change from Bloom’s taxonomy that dominated the past half-century of scholarly work, and is something that could greatly affect the classroom setting and style of teaching that educators who are in support of this theory may use. Regardless of what theory an educator believes in, the chances are that one of their biggest concerns is promoting critical thinking in all of their students. As Lisa Tsui (1999) writes, “Developing students who are independent enough to think critically about academic subject matter and real-life problems is an educational object of paramount importance to our educational system as well as greater society” (page 185). Critical thinking skills are essential not only for academic success, but for life beyond and after education as well. We, as educators, should be aiming to help our students think critically each and every day.

Upon examining both documents for Ontario’s Canadian and World Studies curriculum – the Revised Grade 9/10 (2013) and the Revised Grade 11/12 (2005) – it was quite startling to see how little variety there was amongst the “Expectations” prompts. For example, in the Grade 9/10 document, across all of the listed courses, the word explain was used 104 times (Ministry of Education, 2013), and were connected to expectations where much critical thinking would not be needed, such as “explain the impact on Canadian society and politics of some key events and/or developments during World War II,” (page 112). While this does require students to understand the material that has been covered and to draw connections between different factors and/or events, it does not have them making any inquiries of their own, or truly thinking about what information is given. In the above expectation, as an example, students have to explain how
discuss how events/developments impacted Canada during the war. There is no questioning of whether something actually impacted Canadians or not, or to what extent a certain event impacted Canada, just simply an answer as to how it was done. Understanding is required, but the real critical thinking – making judgement calls, evaluation, questioning – has all been done already. Words that tend to directly require critical thinking showed up significantly less – evaluate showed up just under 40 times, just ahead of judgement (35 times), and synthesize came in at a staggeringly low 11 times throughout the whole document (2013).

The Grade 11/12 Canadian and World Studies curriculum document showed similar trends. If we look at the same four words – explain, evaluate, judgement, and synthesize – we see that the expectations do not differ largely as students progress into higher grades and start to prepare and be prepared by their teachers for post-secondary education or work. Explain showed up over 400 times in this curriculum document; evaluate, judgement, and synthesize combined showed up only 236 times (Ministry of Education, 2005). Again, just as in the Grade 9/10 curriculum documents, this shows that while critical thinking is a part of the Ontario history curriculum, it is a minor part of the curriculum. Students are being given chances to use and improve their critical thinking skills and meet curriculum expectations, but the focus of history classes at all levels is still on being able to describe and explain the facts given. There is not much room provided in the standard Ontario curriculum for students to question why something happened the way it did – as an example asked of me by an International Baccalaureate student of mine discussing treaties after World War One, “why was only Turkey really punished with the Treaty of Sevres?” – or why certain events/facts/etc. are deemed more important than others. If a teacher chooses to provide these extensive opportunities for their students and encourages
questioning and inquiry into history, it is a personal teaching choice, not something that is expected or suggested by the wording of the curriculum documents.

Similarly, this wording shows that while critical thinking should be introduced and used at times in all classes, it is not a skill that is being actively developed within all aspects of the history curriculum and in students’ daily lessons. Unless the history teacher takes it upon themselves to teach in a way where it is fully encouraged and supported, the Ontario curriculum does not focus on it often enough within the “Specific Expectations,” for each course and unit for students to really get a chance to develop these skills. At a ratio of 2:1 for explanations and descriptions over critical thinking, it is clear that critical thinking is being thought about, but that there needs to be more of it expected of students at all levels.

**Critical Thinking, In Terms of History/Social History**

The concept of incorporating social history into the curriculum and lessons to encourage critical thinking is far from a new idea. One researcher in this particular discipline, Lynne Hamer (2000), quotes examples from a study that she has conducted on including a more personal history in a typical history class. In her example, a student named Mel talks about her grade 11 history teacher, Mr. Glenn, saying “[he] tells you information that probably a text wouldn’t tell you: little odds and ends that make it more interesting. You want to learn more, and you pick up things that ordinarily you probably wouldn’t … I’ve noticed that, because I’ve never really had a class like that before” (page 19). What Mr. Glenn is doing here, by including those little ‘odds and ends’ in his lessons, is using social history to engage his students in the class. Or, as Hamer (2000) puts it “his versions of the historical stories, combining the personalized ‘little odds and ends’ with the nationally-canonized events of the textbook, constitute the history learned” (page
Mr. Glenn’s students are learning about more than just the grand narrative – they learn interesting, everyday anecdotes – and as Mel pointed out, it makes for a noticeably different and interesting class. In using social history as part of a regular history class, teachers can, according to Hamer,

invoke an emotional connection between the individual and the nation, and tell about the power of individuals’ actions in both personal and national life … local and known relationships are of paramount importance, in contrast to the story told in the textbook in which attention is drawn away from the known and local and toward the unknown and national. (2000, page 36).

This focus on known and local information is what students are most likely to find relevant and to be interested in – and yet the textbook tends to aim to teach them about the opposite. For example, in Chapter 10 – “From Colony to Nation” (pages 147-157) – in the textbook Making History: The Story of Canada in the Twentieth Century (2000), the focus was all about Canada’s changing role during the 1920s and 1930s as a member of a global community, and its development into a nation within its own right. Nothing was mentioned regarding the changing status of women at this time, the issues facing the working class, or the struggles minority and immigrant groups faced. While these major and relevant issues were addressed at times in Chapters 8 and 9, they were not really discussed in terms of what was actually happening to the people; instead, they were discussed still from the grand-narrative lens. There were no first person accounts or retellings of events from an average person; instead, comments about the events from the Prime Minister, or another prominent figure, were given in their place. People who were not really affected by the events were the ones to make comments on them, rather than those actually involved. For example, in a section talking about the Great Depression, the textbook has a quote spoken by Prime Minister R.B. Bennett – who was one of the few wealthy
men left around this time – “one of the greatest assets a man can have on entering life’s struggle is poverty” (2000, page 139). Rather than hearing about what poverty was like for the poor at this time, students get to learn about what Bennett thought – this is a perspective that very few probably can actually relate to. In using social history in the classroom, like Hamer and Mel’s Mr. Glenn, students still learn about this national textbook history, but it is the ‘odds and ends’ that really keep them hooked in the material and wanting to learn more. Social history keeps students engaged in class, and connects them to the material by making it personal for them and also by connecting it to the bigger scheme that is the grand narrative.

For as long as critical thinking has been considered an important part of secondary school education, history teachers have been trying to get their students to really think about historical issues. As Robert Cole (1990), a high school history teacher, wrote, “before I turned to critical thinking, I felt that a key element was missing from the instructional posture I was trying to achieve” (page 9). Though he does not mention that he uses social history in his classrooms, he does continue on to discuss the balancing act he had to undergo to incorporate critical thinking in class, during a time where “instruction that focus[ed] solely upon the memorization of facts and definitions seem[ed] to be productive,” (Cole, 1990, page 10) and was the common approach to teaching history. He mentions his struggles in including critical thinking in his classrooms, and states that it is not something that is easy to do or quick to succeed in – many times he despaired and wanted to go back to a content-heavy course. However, at the end of the article, once the inclusion of critical thinking has been mastered by the teacher, Cole gives a large list of the skills students will develop if they are made to think critically in a history classroom. He finishes off by saying “you’ll be happy to know that the enterprise will lead almost immediately to a new and more productive classroom environment” (Cole, 1990, page 11).
If it is possible to incorporate critical thinking where it went unrecognized and ignored before, why not try the same thing again, but instead using more social history in classrooms, along with this critical thinking? In doing this, we create a stronger foundation for students’ learning experiences in the history classroom, by fully uniting those three essential pillars in teaching history that is relevant, active, and challenging all at once. The following articles all report on this type of experience, and discuss how beneficial it was for both teachers and students. In “Interdisciplinary Connections: Teacher and Student Empowerment through Social and Cultural History, Critical Pedagogy, and Collaboration,” Eliza Fabillar and Cynthia Jones (2003) report on a study conducted by the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning (ASHP/CML). In this study, they examined history teachers’ uses and incorporation of social history in American high school history classes. Fabillar and Jones (2003) found that in the program created for teachers by the ASHP/CML, social and cultural history/literature and innovative critical pedagogy worked together to enrich the curricula, advance teacher practice and skills, and engage students in rigorous ways (page 18). How exactly did they do this, and interest the students being taught? According to “Interdisciplinary Connections,” teachers’ aims were to revitalize interest in history by challenging the traditional ways that people learn about the past (Fabillar and Jones, 2003, page 19). In other words, they examined the perspectives that are normally ignored in textbooks, but that are often the most relevant to young students, and taught the history students needed to know through this lens. The teachers who went through this program and used ASHP/CML’s curricula were taught to reinterpret American history the same way these new curricula did – from the “bottom up” (page 19). They also write that “the analysis of evidence and multiple viewpoints, characteristic of social history methods, enables students to see themselves not only as historians, but history makers as well” (Fabillar and Jones, 2003, page
This type of history teaching would really engage students, for not only do they study history, but they are a part of it too, and help to make it what it is. Studying history like this gives them a sense of investment towards the history they are learning, connecting the past to their present, and engaging them in ways that had not been done before.

From these examples and the wide array of literature that has been written on this topic, past and present, it is clear that social history and critical thinking can be used together in the high school history classroom, and that they do serve as a means for engaging students. The scholarship shows that this combination of disciplines (social history, critical thinking, and engagement) definitely affects a classroom and its students depending on how it is used and for what purpose. Not only do these fields work together, but social history can also help to improve students’ critical thinking skills, and critical thinking skills help students to better comprehend and analyze aspects of social history. Naturally, the two also work together in the classroom to actively engage students in learning about history as well. Students who study social history – much as I have done myself – tend to be more interested in learning about things that are relevant to who they are and their identities, and students who are learning enjoyable topics tend to be more inclined to think critically about them. This researcher feels that both social history and critical thinking need to be included and used more in history classrooms to ensure student success, and to actively get them engaged and interested in history. This research project will further examine how history teachers in Ontario have focused on these aspects in their classrooms already, and examine how realistic such a vision of a high school history classroom is.

_How Does Engagement Fit into the Picture?_
The third and final layer of this research project deals with how students are – or are not – engaged by their teachers within the history classroom. This researcher believes that student engagement is essential, not just in studying history, but in any and all high school classrooms. If a teacher wants their students to truly learn the material, they must try and engage them within it; to simply provide information and assess is surely not enough. Stephen Porter, writing on engaging students at a post-secondary level, points out that “[it] has become a much-studied topic in higher education because engagement is highly correlated with learning and personal development,” (2006, page 521). Though speaking of students continuing their education after high school, what Porter writes of the connection between engagement, learning, and personal development is true of students at this level as well as all others. If a student is not engaged in whatever they are learning, they will not really learn it, whatever “it” is.

In a study by Indiana University’s Center for Evaluation and Policy dealing with high school students and whether or not they felt engaged in school, an anonymous author for the magazine *Gifted Child Today* reported some pretty dismal statistics. In this brief article synopsis of the lengthier study, the author writes that “only 10% of high school students are highly engaged, and 15% are entirely disengaged,” (2009, page 6). While this statistic leaves 75% of the population falling somewhere between ‘entirely disengaged’ and ‘highly engaged,’ this still means that students are more likely disengaged in at least one class per day than not. The synopsis continues on to explain that “unfortunately, two-thirds of students are bored and 17% are bored in every class [emphasis mine],” (page 6). It is important to also remember that these numbers from the study were obtained through surveys given to high school students themselves. These are not numbers theorized by researchers or conjured based on observation – students are openly declaring their lack of engagement in school.
These opinions are similar to those reported by high school students in the United Kingdom, as shown in Haydn & Harris’ (2010) similar study. Many students of their study reported that history was among the least useful topics taught in school, ahead of only religion and various performance classes (page 246). In breaking down the responses further, many students observed by Haydn and Harris believed history was in the curriculum to bore or punish students in some way – “The pupils need sleep so they made history up,” (page 250) – or had no clue as to why they needed to learn it – “I don’t have a clue,” (page 250). These sentiments are all the more startling not just because their answers for how they feel about history clearly show they are disengaged with the subject, but also because they reflect on prior studies from as far back as 1968, and the data has changed little. Though these numbers are coming out of the United States and United Kingdom, it is highly likely that Canadian students are having similar sentiments regarding their own education.

Like their counterparts researching the post-secondary environment, researchers of high school students have noted the importance and connection of student engagement to successful learning and development, (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Shernoff, 2006, page 159). In their research, as found in the article “Student Engagement in High School Classrooms from the Perspective of Flow Theory,” (2006), it was found that “50% of students reported that their classes were boring, and up to one-third reported that they survived their school day by ‘goofing off’ with their friends,” (page 159). If most students are only “surviving” their school days by “goofing off,” – and openly admitting that they find their classes boring – then what can we as teachers do to get them engaged and active in their own learning?

As Steinberg, Brown, and Dorbusch (1996) reported, “there has been growing awareness of the importance of student engagement for learning and achievement,” (Shernoff et. al., 2006,
Like those conducting research at the post-secondary level, researchers studying high school students have realized that engagement is key if we want students to actually succeed in school, and not just learn what they need to pass the next assessment. Along with this awareness of the importance of engagement come suggestions that teachers can employ to try and better engage their students in day-to-day classroom lessons. For example, in this same *School Psychology Quarterly* article by Shernoff et. al., it is suggested that “students are more likely to become engaged with authentic academic work that intellectually involves them in a process of meaningful inquiry to solve real life problems that extend beyond the classroom,” (page 159). Material needs to be made relevant to the students in some way, so that they can see that what they are learning and the skills they are developing are necessary and helpful to have in the world in which they actually live. Similarly, students tend to be more engaged in student-controlled learning activities, as opposed to teacher-controlled, (page 160); if they can have a sense of autonomy and accountability with whatever they are doing, they are more likely to be engaged in the process and the product. Finally, this article suggests one other method to increase student engagement, which is the primary focus of their research study, and what is called “Flow Theory.”

According to this article, “flow theory is based on a symbiotic relationship between challenges and skills needed to meet those challenges. The flow experience is believed to occur when one’s skills are neither overmatched nor underutilized to meet a given challenge. … Issuing appropriate challenges and providing opportunities to enhance skills may be one of the most ideal ways of engaging students,” (page 160). Reminiscent of Vygotsky’s theory regarding the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Flow Theory is all about providing work for students that is challenging and requires them to really think and put their skills to good use, without
being too overwhelming (or underwhelming, for that matter). Interestingly enough, Vygotsky himself was thinking of how his theory regarding ZPD could be used in a pedagogical environment. According to Zaretskii in his piece, “The Zone of Proximal Development: What Vygotsky Did Not Have Time To Write,” (2009), Vygotsky wrote that “the practical significance of this diagnostic principle is tied to the problem of education. A detailed elucidation of this problem will be given in one of the last chapters,” (Vygotsky, 1984, page 268). However, he passed away before he could write this “detailed elucidation,” and this is where Zaretskii comes into the picture, by trying to fill in what Vygotsky might have been thinking at that time, in terms of education. The primary focus for Zaretskii is on this 7-step theory that the ZPD in students is reached when they have sufficient skills to attempt to solve a problem, but need to work with an adult to successfully solve it at first (pages 77-79). These 7 steps outline how if the problem is of an appropriate challenge and skill level for the child, where they know what they need to do but need help to fill in the gaps, it is the best way to further develop the skills so that tasks can be completed independently.

While this concept does not connect directly to engaging students and getting them to think critically, there is a distinct relationship between these ideas. Like the ZPD, the prime target to keep students engaged in material is, as demonstrated by Shernoff et. al.’s notion of flow theory, is to provide them with tasks that are a balance between challenging and something they have the skills to succeed in doing. With the ZPD teachers must balance between being too easy and too hard. Similarly, if material and activities are too easy students will be disengaged; if material is too hard students will be disheartened and dismayed, and are less likely to want to pay attention and continue with the subject. To engage students, a challenge is necessary, and getting
them to think critically is extremely beneficial, but teacher support and feedback is essential as well.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Procedure

This research study investigated the ways that high school history teachers incorporate social history into their history classrooms, and how it can be used to engage students in learning history and foster and enhance their critical thinking abilities. As a qualitative study, it aims to investigate the different methods history teachers use within their classrooms, whether or not they include social history in the material and lessons they present to their students, and their reasons behind the decisions they make regarding social history in their teachings. This study also looked at how teachers get students to think critically about history, and saw if there is any link between this thinking, and social history. It studied student engagement in history classrooms, and attempts to link all three facets of this report together. This study was conducted by collecting a selection of current literature from the various bodies this topic addresses, and interviewing two secondary school history teachers in Ontario. I worked with two teachers both within the Ontario public school system, who have taught at both the junior and senior levels, and across the spectrum of Canadian and World Studies courses within the Ontario curriculum. All of the data was compiled, transcribed by hand into Microsoft Word, and analyzed to uncover significant trends and themes between the information gathered and the theories presented in the Literature Review. This chapter outlines each stage of the research process, the ethical protocols that were followed, and discusses the limitations that the study has.

Literature Review

The research on the relevant bodies of literature was conducted before the data collection occurred. This was done so that I could become familiar with the current ideas and trends within
the literature, and to obtain significant background knowledge to better hone in on the issues I addressed these current ideas – mostly those regarding the Ontario curriculum – in the interviews with my research participants. However, this research project was an ongoing process, and so at the time of the interviews the literature review was still being added to, and new theories and ideas were constantly brought into the work. It was added to, edited, and changed right up until the very end, so there were some theories that were not discussed during the interviews. The body of literature on both social history and critical thinking is very small, and the combined field itself is relatively new. As such, for this literature review research was done on the two as separate disciplines as well, to complement the smaller but essential literature that combines them. I have also read up on the Ontario curriculum documents for the history courses taught in secondary school, to see whether these materials are including social history in their mix, and to what extent. This was done to answer the questions regarding what keeps teachers from using social history in their classrooms, and what they feel limits them and their students – if they in fact feel limited – from really thinking critically about history. The majority of literature for this research project was found in peer-reviewed academic journals. Almost all of this literature is from a theoretical perspective, although I have included and discussed some qualitative studies that have been done on this topic, to help to further refine and support my own research. I categorized the research into the main themes of this project – social history, critical thinking, and the combination of the two. I also gave student engagement its own section, but I also decided to leave it interwoven throughout the literature review, as it is the thread that bound everything together. If teachers can use both social history and critical thinking together, then student engagement will be at its highest; however, if one of these tools is lacking, engagement does not happen, and the entire triangle crumbles under the weight of the students’ boredom.
Instruments of Data Collection

The data for this research project was collected through semi-structured interviews. I interviewed each of my two participants for around an hour, and I gave myself the option to contact them via email if I had subsequent questions or wanted them to elaborate on their answers. While I wound up not needing clarification, as their answers were very detailed and succinct, I wanted to leave myself the option in case it was needed. I also wanted to keep in contact with both of my participants for the duration of writing this research project. I wanted to do this for a couple of reasons: primarily, to make sure that I stayed true to their opinions and feelings on this topic, and to maintain accuracy within the research. I wanted to send my participants their transcripts upon completion, to make sure I had their words and intentions down correctly; however, upon mentioning this to both my participants they felt that the work would be just fine without and explained that they may not be able to give it their appropriate attention due to the busy school year, so we then agreed instead that I would only email any questions, if I had any. I chose to interview experienced teachers, because I felt that they would have seen and taught in many different types of classrooms and schools, and worked with many different students, at all levels of the secondary school spectrum of history courses. This information provided valuable knowledge regarding how and why teachers include social history in their teaching, and how this has changed in their classroom over time, and with experience. I think that looking at the full experience of my participants provided an interesting dynamic for this research study, and that it gave me even more information to analyze. My interviews were conducted face-to-face, and in person. By meeting face-to-face rather than over the phone, I was able to see their facial expressions and reactions to my questions, as well as better determine how
to handle the interview itself, which helped me in keeping the space comfortable and welcoming, and also in analyzing their answers and creating my themes and topics.

For the face-to-face interviews, I scheduled a meeting with my participants in a location of their choosing. I wanted them to choose the location so that they would be comfortable talking with me and sharing their knowledge and expertise. I made sure to allow them to choose the time and date of the interview as well, so that it was as convenient as possible for them; I also made sure to let them know that if they needed to reschedule or chose not to participate at any time that they just had to let me know, and that they were perfectly free to do so. I recorded the interview with each participant in its entirety, with their permission, using the “Voice Memo” software on my iPhone 5s. Each participant gave consent to being recorded prior to the interview taking place, both verbally and by signing my consent forms.

My interview questions were crafted in a semi-formal yet conversational manner, because I wanted to convey respect and gratitude for the experience and knowledge my research participants shared with me, but I also wanted to be friendly and honest with them, so that they would treat me the same way. I organized my questions so that they progressed naturally, but I also categorized them based on common themes or intent, in the hopes that I would obtain more extensive information on each of the key areas I planned to explore in this project. I started with some simple background questions, to get to know my participants better and learn about their many experiences. From there, I asked them about their experiences teaching history – great lessons, how they plan, what they try to focus on, and so on. I have decided to actually not ask them about their opinions on and uses of social history until towards the end of the interview, as I did not want them to feel like they have to answer positively to suit my needs or ‘help’ me. I wanted them to speak perfectly honestly about their history classes, so that I could see whether
or not they truly include social history, and if not, so I could see what they think is limiting their use of it. I also wanted to see what they think their students think of their history classes, and whether they felt their students really think critically and are engaged. My aim was to learn about what teachers think of their history classrooms – the successes, the limitations, the students, and what is being learned. Whether they actually used social history in their classrooms or not is something that I planned to find out during the interview process. I decided that if I found out that they do use social history, I would ask them more details about how they use it, and how they feel it benefits their students. If they do not use social history, I planned to find out why they have decided against it, and perhaps what experiences turned them off of it in the past. I would incorporate both the good and bad in what they say regarding social history and critical thinking, and its role in increasing student engagement in their classrooms. I was also interested in seeing if there was a change between how social history is incorporated at the applied and academic levels, and what effect this has had in the classroom and on students.

**Data Analysis**

To start analyzing the research process, I transcribed verbatim the interviews with each of my research participants. I listened to the interviews several times over during this process, to ensure that I did not miss anything that my participants have said, and to make sure that I was accurate in my transcribing and recording. Once I had everything transcribed properly, I read the notes over many more times, making note of any commonalities or things that interested me within the interviews. I decided to use the coding software QDA Miner to help in the data analysis process, as its user interface was very simple, and it allowed me to directly compare my participants’ responses to the same question at the same time. I also found it much easier than reading through printed pages of script and trying to remember what was said by whom and
when, as I was able to easily use the search function to make the process quicker and more streamlined. I highlighted everything of significance and made sure to document everything within the interviews that would help me to answer the research question. To differentiate between topics/trends/categories, I used different coloured highlighters and font colour. Once I had all of my findings from my interviews, I then compared what was gathered to the literature review, to see how my research question was supported or refuted by my research participants. My findings are discussed in the following chapter, Chapter Four: Findings, and the conclusions I have reached after conducting all of the research and analyzing it extensively have been developed in Chapter Five: Conclusions, where my gathered data has been connected to the information garnered from Chapter Two: Literature Review.

**Research Participants**

As mentioned above, for my research study I interviewed two high school history teachers that are currently teaching at least one history course. My only requirements for teachers selected for this study was that they had to have at least ten years of experience in teaching, some of which had to have been done within Ontario secondary schools, teaching the history curriculum. Other than that, I was very open regarding any other factors – I did not feel it necessary to consider gender, sexuality, race, culture, or age of my participants. This was because I was focusing solely on whether or not my participants employ social history in their lessons; I wanted to give all my participants the benefit of the doubt that they do use it, regardless of their own personal make-up. If there happened to be a major discrepancy between teachers using it – say, if a minority teacher did but a Caucasian teacher did not – then I was ready for it, and had prepared questions for that situation to be explored further. While this was not a dimension that I had considered in my original proposal and research, it was something that
I started to consider while creating the interview questions. While it turned out to be a factor that was irrelevant in the conducted interviews, for both teachers incorporated social history to a large extent, I now realize that perhaps with more participants it could have become something more prominent.

I recruited my participants both from Toronto schools and from my hometown of Windsor, Ontario, for the sole purpose of personal convenience. While this may be considered by many to be “in my own backyard” (Creswell, 2013, page 151), I did not use teachers from my hometown that I know or who had ever taught me in the past. Similarly, I did not use teachers that I had worked with in Toronto, such as my former Associate Teachers from my first year of placements or those I met through my mentoring work at a local private school. Rather, I used the teachers I do know as a sort of network, to help me recruit my participants. I spend a lot of time in my hometown with my family, and I also felt that interviewing participants from two different school boards and regions would provide some interesting factors of analysis for my research. I also tried to recruit participants by asking my MT program classmates and colleagues, to see if they had any leads I could follow. Within the interview itself, I asked some background questions first, just to get to know my participants better, and to learn about their experiences and how it shaped them as history teachers. From there, I moved into the questions that connected directly to what I was researching. Both of my participants were very eager to share their experiences and knowledge of teaching history, and their answers definitely opened up my eyes to teaching history in Ontario.

*Ethical Review Procedures*
Before I even set up a meeting location and time for the interviews with my research participants, I provided them with an email copy of my letter of consent, which included the purposes of my study, what I was asking of them, and my name and information. It also included the name and information of my research supervisor, in case they had any questions for them regarding me and my work. Before they officially became a part of my research project, they must agree to what I have asked of them in my consent letter – namely to being recorded and participating in the interview – and sign two copies – one for my records, and one for theirs. They were allowed to leave my study at any point in time, should they wish to no longer continue. If either participant had chosen to leave, they would not have had to offer any explanation or reason as to why – they could have just left. As for our actual interviews, only myself and my participant knew where and when we were meeting. I also made sure they were completely anonymous within the research project and the interview transcripts that I provided for this project; their schools and any other people they mention were also made anonymous and kept confidential. I offered to provide each participant with a transcript of their interview for their records if they should want it, so they could ensure that I did not alter anything or change their words for my own benefit. I also informed them – in person and in the letters of consent – that there was little risk in participating in the study.

Limitations

My primary limitation with this research project is that I interviewed only two teachers, and only for a short period of time. Due to this, my research was not generalizable; however, the research was still significant to the study of critical thinking, social history, and student engagement in education. As I wanted the interviews to flow more like a conversation, and only be semi-structured, this was also a limitation to the study. While I feel that this allowed for more
honest answers from my research participants, it also meant that I had to omit certain questions that were irrelevant, or occasionally have a participant elaborate on some questions more than others. For example, if one teacher clearly did not use social history in their teachings, I could not ask them about how they use it – instead I had to ask relevant questions to find out why they do not – these would not be the same questions I would give to a participant that does use social history. This means that there was some inconsistency between research participants’ answers, and the interview itself, but I felt that my changing of questions was useful to the study, once analyzed extensively. This research study was also limited because of the narrow scope of the study. I was only looking at a select few history teachers across the province – as such, my research was based solely on their opinions, observations, and experiences. I did not have any access to students’ or administrators’ perspectives on the topic; this means that the results of the study were very narrow as well. For example, I asked questions about students within classrooms, but did not ask the students themselves, but rather their teachers. This answer might not have been the same perspective or answer that a student would have given if answering the same question. Overall, despite these limitations, this research project provides valuable information for continued work in the field.
Chapter Four: Data Analysis

Introduction

The primary goal of this research study is to answer the question, “In what ways and for what purposes do Ontario secondary school teachers include social history as an integral aid to foster the critical thinking skills of their students, and further engage them in the history curriculum?” The research data for this paper examines the participants’ opinions and perspectives on each of the primary sections of this inquiry – social history, critical thinking, and student engagement. While none of the questions, save for the focal research question, directly connect all of these links together, this paper aims to see if the research participants have made these connections within their own teaching practices. More importantly, the goal of this research is to find out whether or not including aspects of social history into lessons and history courses really does affect students’ critical thinking and student engagement, and if so in what ways.

In conducting the interviews to support this research project and my theories regarding the methods in which history teachers engage students and foster their critical thinking, I have learned that teachers are seriously thinking about how to get their students thinking, and try a number of interesting tricks and techniques to do this. Critical thinking has become a main objective of the secondary school history teacher; whether this is because it is now inundated throughout the curriculum or because teachers actually believe that critical thinking is an essential skill that students must develop, however, results in interesting yet differing opinions. Both of the participants I spoke with, Petyr and Neddard, spoke strongly and passionately about critical thinking throughout their interviews, and based on their discussions of lessons and units,
assessment and activities, it became clearer and clearer that they both also strive to engage all of their students, regardless of how they learn or what their interests are.

What was perhaps most fascinating in these two interviews was that despite the fact that I actively chose not to use the phrases “social history,” “local history,” “personalized history,” or any phrase connoting a similar meaning in the interview questions, this branch of history was actively and repeatedly brought into the conversation by both participants. Petyr and Neddard, are two high school history teachers from very different secondary schools, with very different educational backgrounds and experiences. Petyr teaches at a public school in Toronto, Ontario, whilst Neddard is the Department Head for the Canadian and World Studies courses at a school in Windsor, Ontario. Petyr always knew that he wanted to be a teacher, and did his education degree concurrently with his undergraduate degrees in History and Math. He has taught internationally in a couple of countries, but all of the history teaching he has done has been within Ontario, at the high school level. Neddard started his career in teaching at a later age, after exploring other options and studying the sciences in his first years of University. He has done all of his teaching within Ontario, and started out as a Junior/Intermediate level teacher before obtaining Senior qualifications.

Despite their many differences and the different environments in which they work, both agreed that if a history teacher wants students to actually think about the history they are learning, become interested and invested in the class, and seek out questions rather than answers, then the history being learned must be relatable to them in some way. Petyr and Neddard also agreed through their answers that the best way to do this is by actively incorporating social history into their lessons, and allowing for students to make potential connections between their own lives and their current environment and that of the one being taught. They also agreed that it
is equally important for the teacher to be engaged in the class and willing to learn alongside their students, flexible and adaptable to last-minute changes in their plans.

**Themes & Topics**

In analyzing the data obtained from Petyr and Nedward, there were quite a few common concepts and themes discussed by the two of them. Though their individual methods often differed and their reasons were, of course, a mixture of professional knowledge and personal practice and experience, there were many similarities between their opinions and chosen methods for teaching history and focusing on engagement and critical thinking. For the purpose of best connecting the information these two participants provided me with to the literature on this particular topic, I have decided to discuss their answers in terms of how they connect to the themes of critical thinking and student engagement.

These themes were developed and titled as a result of extensive analysis of what the research participants had to say regarding their own experiences in teaching history, critical thinking, and keeping students engaged. Though they come from different backgrounds as people and as educators, it was fascinating to see how similarly they answered many questions, as will be developed and explored in the following sections. While the coding itself was based on the three main aspects being researched in this project – Critical Thinking, Social History, and Student Engagement – the themes below are organized instead based on the main factors the participants felt were most important in teaching an engaged and thinking history class. These themes, rather than focus on a sole aspect each, combine information and data from all three aspects, to show just how interconnected they all are within the field and the research.

**Make it Personal, Keep it Relevant**
In speaking with both Petyr and Neddard, it became clear that the most important thing for them to do when teaching a history class – any class, any grade, and any unit – is to provide opportunity for the students to connect to the topic in some way. Both teachers feel that what their students are learning about, regardless of how long ago it actually happened, can be shown to be relevant to twenty-first century high school students; this relevance is extremely important, as it gets students interested in the topic, and makes them want to learn more. They may not always be lucky in having a great social studies teacher with a background in the material in elementary school, and come to high school history classes with opinions on the subject already formed. Neddard, for example, spoke about how the Grade 10 Canadian history course may be the first time that students actually learn history from a teacher with a background in the topic. In answering the question regarding what he thinks makes a lesson of his great, Neddard started off by responding that “When you’re grade 7 and 8 you’ll oftentimes have a history teacher that doesn’t have a history background, so they’ll just be reading the textbook and answering the questions, and that’s boring,” (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). If students have had such an experience in their elementary classes, it makes it that much harder for the high school teacher to get them interested – they may already believe that history class is just about reading about things that happened a long time ago, and memorizing the names and dates. One of Neddard’s solution to such preconceived misconceptions is to “Always try to make it relevant; it’s what I’m always trying to do,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014). He then elaborated on a particular lesson he had just given in class recently, involving Canadians’ enthusiasm to join in and fight at the start of the First World War. In talking about this, he said, “…I made it like there was a free field trip, with all kinds of adventure. All they had to do was
sign up – it was going to paid for and everything. They all signed up, and they were all ready to go. And then you tell them ‘Congratulations, you just signed up for the Canadian Expeditionary Force’,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014).

It was this moment, for this particular class, where students fully understood how the war was first perceived by the young Canadian men enlisting; it was also this moment where they realized that they, too, would have signed up for that war, even though they know now how tragic and destructive it was for Canadians involved. They also realized that this was similar to how the war was portrayed by those looking to enlist young men for the fighting, which led to such enthusiasm and desire to be involved. In discussing WWI at the start with this different approach, Neddard was able to get his students to visualize themselves in the same shoes as the young men who enlisted, and made them realize that they would have had a similar reaction and desire to join the fight. Students see themselves in these young soldiers, and it makes them more inclined to want to learn about what actually happened; as Neddard said, “That [lesson] seems to go over well every year,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014).

Petyr had very similar things to say regarding how he gets his students interested in a high school history class. When asked what his favourite history class to teach was, his response was that “I embrace the challenge of making Canadian history exciting and interesting and relevant to the kids. And I think one of the common stereotypes or misconceptions that students have – Canadian students have – is that our history is boring, and our history is dry, and that our history is not interesting.” (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014). Like Neddard, Petyr knows that not all of his students are going to find history interesting right from the start – especially not if it is their first history class at the high school level, after experiencing elementary school history. However, like Neddard, he also aims to prove to his students that
history is not boring, by making it relevant to the students in some way. Petyr gives an example of this later on, in response to a question regarding whether his incorporation of more modern and currently relevant things has a positive impact on his students in thinking about history. He responds by saying that,

I don’t [always] give them a context for it, so like I don’t tell them who Machiavelli is, I just throw the quote on the board – “It is better to be feared than it is to be loved,” – and I ask them to pick a side on that. In the context of – we can talk about in the context of leadership, or in the context of family dynamics, or the context of a relationship – there are ways to personalize that, and not just talking about a prince ruling an empire; that’s very abstract to them, perhaps, (personal communication, October 11, 2014).

In doing this, Petyr’s class can have an entire debate or discussion on whether or not Machiavelli was ‘right’ in his declaration, without necessarily needing to know who he was or the historical context of the quote, just based on what they personally know and have experienced. In this way, when Petyr does reveal that information, and explains that it was part of a larger philosophical work to a young prince on how to rule his kingdom most effectively, students can use their knowledge to connect to the historical context, and better understand the situation at hand. It makes it much easier for Petyr’s students to understand and become involved in complex topics and themes if he starts his lesson by saying, “What kind of parenting do you think is most effective for raising children?” (personal communication, October 11, 2014) instead of “Totalitarianism or Democracy, which form of government do you support?” (personal communication, October 11, 2014). As Petyr said, “They might not have ever even come across these words yet,” (personal communication, October 11, 2014); if they do not have a grasp on the terminology, how can they possibly answer the question? In changing the subject of discussion to something they can connect to – parents and that relationship – Petyr’s class has an engaging and interactive discussion on the subject before they even get into the true topic of the day. When he finally brings it all together and shows them that they just discussed a
philosophical work written in the 16th century, and had a serious discussion on what a successful
government should look like, they can actually see the birth of modern Western government like
we have, and they say “wow, that makes sense to me, and I can connect with that.” (personal
communication, October 11, 2014). By making it personal for them and relevant to their lives he
enables them to really connect with historical topics and understand them.

Petyr and Neddard’s approaches to making history relevant and personal for students in
their classes were very similar. Both mentioned incorporating current events or pop culture in
their daily lessons, as a means of showing students that the past is not so far away or distanced
from what is going on in the world today. Similarly, both mentioned that they also try to bring or
drop the students into whatever time period they are looking at. One of Petyr’s primary
assessments for his unit on Canada during the 1920s, for example, involves having the students
recreate a speakeasy environment within the classroom. He elaborates on this assignment, stating
that

they need to research the slang and the jargon and incorporate it into their one
presentation as a class, and the fashion and clothing and music, and the dancing, the
ambience, and setting, and all the social dynamics and the different characters that might
be present at or in a speakeasy in the 1920s. And all the social and cultural implications
that that has as well, (personal communication, October 11, 2014).

In this way, rather than merely giving them the facts or telling them about what the times were
like, Petyr allows them to relive the experiences they have just learned about as much as he
possibly can, by incorporating it into their assessments and activities. Neddard, though he did not
provide any specific assessment examples, mentioned similar concepts that he uses with his
classes, such as “…do fake news, saying ‘As of next year, the consumption and distribution and
manufacturing of any tobacco products will result in jail and fines’,” (Neddard, personal
communication, October 14, 2014). He has them discuss this extensively and approach all sides
and perspectives of the situation – once his students have fully fleshed out all of the details they think are important and decided on whether this course of action is justified or not, Nedward then mentions to them that this is actually what it was like to live during the Prohibition era. Much in the same way that Petyr’s students get to relive the 1920s through their assessment, Nedward’s students get to see what it would be like to live during a different historical period, and see how closely connected the ideas then are to ideas and concepts today.

Both Petyr and Nedward understand that for many high school students, history can be a pretty boring topic, and one from which they can easily disengage. Both teachers had plenty of stories regarding students’ perceptions of history at the beginning of the school year upon entering their classes. Petyr has heard countless students say, “you know, I really don’t like history; I find it boring, I find it irrelevant,” (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014). Similarly, Nedward’s students have often mentioned that “this is the most boring stuff, this isn’t about me, this has nothing to do with me,” (Nedward, personal communication, October 14, 2014), when learning about the ‘grand narrative’ of history – or, as Nedward phrases it, “the dead, rich, old, White guy,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014). While it is important that students learn about this history as well – because most of the narratives of history, regardless of which history course a student is in, do involve the ‘dead, rich, old, White guy’ to a certain extent, Petyr and Nedward have realized that it is necessary to teach other historical narratives if we truly want to engage our students. Both teachers mention that it is important for students to see themselves or their families within the curriculum – if they are in the curriculum, “they’ll be more interested in learning it, because it’ll be about them,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014). In teaching them about their pasts, and showing them that they do have a
place within history, Petyr and Neddard work to get students actually interested in learning history, and really critically thinking about historical concepts and big ideas.

What was perhaps most interesting in talking to Petyr and Neddard about making history personal and relevant was the fact that they both actually follow up with students in their class who have admitted to being bored by prior history classes. For example, Petyr talked in our discussion about how he actively follows up with those same students who showed boredom at the start of the year, to get their feedback on the course and their opinions on history as a subject. And, delightedly, he reported that “some of them have come back and said, ‘You know what? I used to hate history but I find it really interesting now,’ or ‘You’ve enlightened me on this’,” (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014). Neddard mentioned similar tactics, always taking in feedback and seeing if he has been able to change students’ minds regarding history, with similar successes. In steering away at times from the ‘grand narrative’ form – a term that Petyr indirectly referenced at times in our discussion – both teachers have been able to engage a greater number of their students in history.

Petyr and Neddard have personally seen that there are benefits to teaching history that better reflects the diversity and uniqueness of their classrooms. Both also talked extensively on how they always try to make the topics and lessons personal and relevant to their students in some way. Whether it be through discussing what different time periods were like for different groups – women, Chinese Canadians, First Nations, and so on – or through incorporating ideas and events from modern society and culture and connecting them to the past, the fact remains that both teachers actively make their history classes personal and relevant for students. Through discussion, I got the distinct impression that both teachers believe that if the students cannot find a way to connect to the material they are being made to learn, they will be less likely to actually
learn it. They will also have trouble engaging in the material, and will not care to think critically about it, as they can tend to find it irrelevant to their lives.

*Critical Thinking: Necessary, but "It's Hard"

When asked about critical thinking in their history classrooms, both Petyr and Neddard had a lot to say on the matter. They each talked about their own classrooms, the textbooks, and the curriculum that they follow, and though they had many different things to say regarding critical thinking, the one thing that resonated with both of them was that it is essential for students to be made to think critically and develop those skills within the classroom, but that it is extremely hard to do at times. Petyr and Neddard discussed this from a student perspective, but they also pondered on the fact that sometimes it is hard for teachers to do as well, and that it is not something that is always easy to incorporate at all times. Both teachers used the phrase “it's hard” several times throughout the course of our discussions, and in elaborating on this theme with them and digging deeper into what they meant by it, it became clear that critical thinking is difficult for a number of reasons, for all parties involved.

First and foremost, critical thinking can be challenging for students, especially if they have not really been given the chance to practice and develop the skills required. Neddard elaborated on this, saying “Well, it’s hard work. Sometimes they just want to copy a note because it’s easier, and they don’t have to think. Critical thinking is hard work … So sometimes they just want to not do it, because it’s hard,” (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). And he is right – critical thinking does take a lot of work, and it can be very challenging at times. It requires a lot of practice – practice that students do not always want to do. It can also be difficult
to get students thinking critically during a history class because they will all be at different skill levels and have different capabilities as well. Neddard discusses this as well; he talked about how in a single class you can have your English Language Learners (ELLs), students with IEPs, gifted students, and students who have had very little exposure to critical thinking – for Neddard, this means that it is “really important to get to know who your students are,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014). You need to know who may already be a strong critical thinker in your class, and who may need a bit more practice – “you do a lot of diagnostic work at the beginning to kind of figure out where they are,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014). This can be extremely difficult, but it can be even harder to set up a critical thinking task for your students and have them become frustrated because they are not yet ready for it, or have them become disengaged because the task is not challenging enough. Both of those possibilities are incredibly undesirable, and it is up to the teacher to find the perfect balance to prepare students for critical thinking that is challenging, but not impossible for their level of skill and capability.

Petyr had a lot to say regarding critical thinking as well, but he approached it from a different angle. While Neddard focused on how hard critical thinking can be in general, Petyr had a lot to say about how difficult it can be to get kids to think critically when it comes to dealing with different perspectives. As Petyr explains, “there is almost always – I mean, always, undoubtedly – more than one perspective on any given situation, on any incident,” (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014). Studying history is all about examining and understanding different perspectives, and this is definitely not always easy. To elaborate, Petyr said that “it continues to be a challenge, because I think for many of our students it takes effort, and it takes work to do that, and it takes a level of commitment to do that … ‘the teacher’s just
going to tell me eventually what the right answer is,’ and it’s kind of hard to break them out of that,” (personal communication, October 11, 2014). For Petyr, it is clear that students do not always want to do challenging work and practice their critical thinking skills – as Neddard mentioned in my discussion with him, sometimes students just want the answers given to them, because it is easier. History classes are ideal for developing what Petyr calls ‘soft skills’ – the critical thinking piece being one of many – and while we as teachers may want to spend as much time developing these skills as we can, our students may not always feel the same way. Critical thinking is tough, and developing these skills can be very challenging; these skills are necessary within any history course, but it does take time and effort for most of our students, and not every student always wants to meet this challenge.

Critical thinking can also be challenging for the teachers, but in a different way. Neddard also elaborated on this in our discussion. According to him, “it’s hard to teach … what does it look like when you sit there, what does it look like in the classroom? There’s been conference after conference of what that looks like, and it’s hard,” (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). Teachers truly want to get their students thinking critically, and they are trying to come up with new and exciting ways to go about it, but it can be difficult to imagine what critical thinking looks like to our students. Just as we ask them to think critically and see events from the perspectives of different historical characters, we too must think critically and picture ourselves as our students, trying to learn history. Just as it can be a challenge for them, it can also be very difficult for us. One particular comment of Neddard’s really resonated regarding critical thinking and teaching practices concerning it. He said that “the teachers are experimenting and throwing out their best practices. I still think there’s a long way to go, and a lot of ‘here, read the textbook, answer these questions, memorize these dates and facts, out
there.’ But I think a lot of teachers are starting to get away from that,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014). I believe that this shows that there is a lot of hope out there on the critical thinking front. Teachers are actively trying to come up with ways to get their students thinking critically, and conferences and organizations have dedicated their time and money to creating resources and training teachers to make the process easier. While we may still have a long way to go, as Neddard suggests, the perceptions regarding critical thinking are shifting, and teachers are becoming aware of how important it is to develop this skills set within a history classroom. It is not just about memorizing dates and facts and reading the textbook – it is now about getting students to actively think about how events are connected, why things happened the way they did, and, most importantly, to ask key questions.

To connect with this idea of critical thinking as hard in and of itself, it is also hard to get students thinking critically if they are not engaged or interested by the material. This directly ties in to the topic of student engagement, which Petyr and Neddard addressed as well. Petyr in particular focused on how difficult it can be to develop students’ critical thinking skills if they just do not care about the material. In talking with Petyr, I learned that he was especially interested in this aspect of critical thinking, because it can be so challenging at times. Petyr discussed critical thinking and teaching content that is relevant to students together, saying that “when you have those students that are disengaged, that’s all the more challenging to try and make things relevant and engaging for those students. And that definitely affects their willingness to think critically about things as you push them, or as you try to push them.” (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014). He went on to say that some of them just maintain the same attitude throughout the class – they stay uninterested, they never become engaged, and they never wind up really learning to think critically about the material. This was an especially
interesting discussion to have, as it directly connects social and relevant history to critical thinking in the history classroom, which is one of the key components of this research project. Petyr has seen this occur in many of his classrooms – students need to be engaged before they should be thinking critically about material, and they tend to be more engaged if they can see themselves in the material and lesson in some way.

In talking with Petyr and Neddard, it was obvious to me that critical thinking is something that history teachers are actively thinking about and incorporating into their classes. While teachers may be working hard to get their students thinking critically, students are not always so eager. Though Petyr and Neddard are only two high school history teachers out of thousands, their experiences in getting students to think critically are valuable, and their stories provided a lot of insight into what critical thinking can look like in the classroom. Both teachers know that critical thinking can be difficult – for the students to do successfully and for the teachers to visualize – but that it is also immensely rewarding for all if done right. Upon asking Petyr and Neddard how students demonstrate critical thinking within their classrooms, I received very interesting and enlightening answers. Petyr, for example, mentioned that he really starts to see his students thinking critically when they “openly and willingly disagree with [him], but in a way that’s intelligent and focused,” (personal communication, October 11, 2014). He loves it when students start to really see the other perspectives that he is always bringing to class, and when they start to bring their own assumptions, opinions, and questions into the equation. When Petyr’s students “start coming forward [with these things], or when they present papers or assignments that are more out-of-the-box,” (personal communication, October 11, 2014) that is when he starts to see true critical thinking from his students. Neddard, on the other hand, still uses a very Socratic approach from time to time, where he gets them to discuss via a series of
probing questions. He also said that he “do[es] a lot of stuff where they have to categorize things – that’s sort of higher level thinking. I look at concept attainment stuff … they have to make connections between things,” (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). Neddard does a variety of critical thinking activities, such as having students make judgment calls, complete gallery walks and ranking activities, having them come up with questions based on a reading, and so on; Neddard mentioned that he has an entire folder devoted to critical thinking-enhancing strategies, and that he is always adding new ones to it. Critical thinking is very tough at times in all aspects: they may lack the tools or skills necessary to implement critical thinking; they may need more clarity and scaffolding; both teachers and students may have varying assumptions about what critical thinking actually is; if students have not had much practice in critical thinking, they may be hesitant to even try. Students can be especially resistant to doing such challenging work, but it is necessary in history and it definitely pays off in the long run.

**Discard those Textbooks, Replace (Mostly) with Primary Sources**

By further questioning Petyr and Neddard about how they get their students thinking critically, and asking them to elaborate on their ideas and methods for doing so, both teachers specifically had something to say regarding course textbooks versus primary sources. Petyr, for example, discussed how he feels that he is a lot less reliant on textbooks per se than when he was a new teacher (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014), and that he tends to use resources that he has either developed for himself or come across in his planning and prepping. Neddard, similarly, said that he tends to ‘get away’ from the textbooks and the secondary interpretations of things (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014) – in this sense he, like Petyr, prefers to use resources he has himself created or found. Neddard’s main issue regarding history textbooks seemed to come from the fact that the edition his classes have
primary access to is extremely outdated. He told me that “the textbooks that I’ve had are from 1999, let’s be honest, for one,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014). Many major events that shaped our modern day society and that should be studied in a history class, such as 9/11 for example, are not included in the class textbooks Neddard has. He went on to say that it is nice “to have a class set so when they’re doing a problem they can use them as they need, to help them,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014), but that there is such an extensive amount of resources available on the internet that he, like many other teachers he has worked with, tends to just find his own material online or create resources if he needs to. So, like Petyr, Neddard is able to find more relevant and suitable materials for his class on the internet, as opposed to in the textbooks with which he has been provided.

However, despite their steering away from textbooks, both Petyr and Neddard also had positive things to say regarding textbooks in a history classroom – while they may not always use them, they do know that textbooks can be beneficial. Petyr, for example, spoke on how he finds that specifically in terms of the critical thinking piece, textbooks can be “hit or miss – some textbooks are better than others, obviously, and certain sections are better than others,” (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014). He continued, commenting that “I have seen some good, some really good reflection questions or critical thinking questions in some textbooks,” (personal communication, October 11, 2014). Petyr may not use textbooks often in his history classes, but he has seen that they can be good and that they are helpful resources to have.

Neddard had quite a bit to say about the great textbooks out there, and had plenty of reasons for why textbooks can be good. In talking about whether textbooks are a good source of material or not, Neddard explained that, “The whole textbook [Canadian Sources Investigated] is primary sources, pretty much. So, when the textbooks are like that I use them. I tend to use the Canadiana
Scrapbooks a lot. They’re old, but I really like them, the kids enjoy them, and it’s primary. So, I use them selectively,” (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). For Neddard, a good textbook is one that contains plenty of primary sources for him and his students to go through. Rather than just relating the facts and telling students what happened, Neddard likes textbooks that provide sources from the time period being studied – primary sources – so that his students can interpret and analyze the information themselves. Both teachers, though they do not rely heavily on textbooks themselves, realize that good textbooks can be absolutely important and beneficial in a history classroom. Though Petyr may look for that ‘critical thinking piece’, and Neddard hunts for books that have good primary sources for his students, they are actually looking for the same things. Both Petyr and Neddard want the resources that they choose to enable their students to ‘do’ history, rather than simply learning about history.

*Get Your Students to *Do*"History*

This idea of getting students to “do” history is actually something that one of the participants, Neddard, discussed in response to the question, “Could you tell me about an average day in one of your history classes? What do you do to get the kids thinking about the topic [history]?” (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). His response? “Well, I’ve been trying to do a lot of stuff where they actually do history, instead of just learn history. Like, do what historians actually get to do. They never get to actually do that,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014). I found this comment fascinating, and so pressed for more details. Neddard gladly elaborated, saying that what he likes to do is “show them that it’s a lot of interpretations and things,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014), and that he does a lot
of work that has them analyzing and thinking about primary sources. He gets them really
taking ‘the 5Ws’, and makes them figure out the situation for themselves – where an
image was taken, when a song was written, who the people present may be, and so on. This, he
says, “get[s] them to think of being a historian as a detective,” (personal communication,
October 14, 2014). I found this to be a really novel idea, and one that seems like it would work
really well – students are having to figure out the history for themselves, and actively think about
the situation, rather than passively learning about the information from Neddard or a textbook. In
making his students the historians, even if it is just once in a while or for a little part of each
lesson, Neddard allows his students to really make connections between what they have learned
and what he has just presented them with. As a fellow history teacher, I believe that this would
be a great way to teach students about how perspective can change anything, and, as Neddard
says, “show them that it’s a lot of interpretation,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014).
Turning students into historian detectives shows them that there can be several possible answers
to any historical problem based on evidence alone, and that unlike other classes they may take,
history is one that is very subjective. Even though it too is a course that many think is about “just
learning the dates, the names, and the facts,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014),
‘doing’ history like this demonstrates to students that how you see an event and interpret it can
change or alter the significance of these facts.

Though it was Neddard that mentioned he makes his students ‘do’ history, in describing
how he gets his students to ‘do’ history, it becomes clear that he uses aspects of social history in
doing these activities – pictures of average people, relevant media from the time period – and
that he does it with the intent of getting his students to think about history and be interested by it.
In this sense, Neddard really has combined social history, critical thinking, and student
engagement within his classrooms, and, from the discussion we had, I was able to conclude that he feels it has been successful and that it pays off for his students in many ways. As he concluded, it is “something that will draw their attention in,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014). Petyr, though he did not specifically use the phrase “doing history,” as Neddard did, does similar things with his classes. As mentioned in earlier sections, Petyr “tr[ies] to draw parallels to contemporary characters, like whether it’s in music that they can relate to or in other aspects of society that they can relate to; you know, pop culture,” (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014). Rather than being detectives in Petyr’s class, it is almost as if they are time travellers – connecting past to the present and understanding how everything came to unfold in the ways that it did. He has them focus on the similarities between now and whatever period they may be studying – social dynamics, cultural trends, political turmoil – and asks them to try and figure out those same 5Ws that are so common in historical thinking concepts. Both teachers clearly think that getting their students to play a more active role in their classes is a key way to get them interested and learning the material, and both teachers have similar – yet unique to their experiences – methods.

This notion of ‘doing history’ is not one that I had thought of myself at the starting of this research project, but upon analyzing the data and really looking at what my participants were saying, it became obvious that this is what both of my participants were doing, extensively, even though they may not use those specific words. While Neddard came up with the phrase to describe the process he puts his students through, it turned out that Petyr does similar things as well, and that ‘doing history’ is something much bigger and inclusive than I had anticipated. Every time a teacher has their students working through the concepts of historical thinking, and actively trying to decode or interpret historical sources to form some sort of opinion or judgment,
they are – perhaps unknowingly – allowing their students to become the historians and ‘do history’.

To Conclude

Despite how positively Petyr and Neddard discussed social history, critical thinking, and engaging their students, I was also very interested to find out if there were any negatives to teaching history in this way, and what they were. While there were not very many that they mentioned to me, there were a couple of key things they discussed that may be difficult for students or in the classroom. Petyr, for the most part, talked about how it really needs to be well set up, and students have to be given ample opportunities to think critically and be exposed to social history, otherwise they may just get confused and the meaning behind the lesson will be lost. For example, he talks about teaching a history class about genocide, and in the introductory unit he really wanted them to realize that the leaders of these genocides were people just like everyone else, and that to fully understand the situation they have to understand that complexity and depth – that these leaders were not just pure evil from the moment they were born. As he explained it to me,

One of the things that I was trying to highlight or to get the students to think about, was the fact that we see the perpetrators of these genocides as these horrific, heinous, evil…anomalies, in history. You know, the Hitlers, and the Pol Pots, and I mean these are wicked, evil men that were – something must have been different about them and their upbringing that caused them to be like this, you know. They were unique, and they were the exceptions to the rule. And I think one of the things that I was trying to highlight or trying to at least get them thinking about, was the fact that though you may not, or though we may not, and hopefully don’t become another Hitler, within all of us is the ability or the capabilities for things that are less than noble, you know, less than whole and good, right? That within all of us, whether it’s looking at things like issues of stereotyping and racism, or discrimination even in subtle forms, um, that we all have biases and we all have prejudices, and that it’s kind of unharnessed or unregulated, (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014).
This unit he brought into the classroom focused on a lot of complex issues – good and evil as a spectrum; the idea that anyone can become evil and do terrible things if prompted or provoked; the differences between bias, prejudice, stereotyping, and racism; and many other difficult topics. Not only is this a course with a lot of sensitive material and difficult concepts to begin with, but Petyr furthered the complexity by trying to get students to understand that these evil dictators were, in the past, just like them to a certain extent, and did perfectly average things. Petyr wanted his students to look at these genocides as not so separate from their own experiences, and show them that as terrible as the events were, they are issues that we can relate to in some way. In discussing these concepts with me, Petyr concluded that he “[doesn’t] know if they fully got that I think there were some that, when we would have conversations one day they might jive with me in terms of what we were talking about, and then the next day they’d be right off again, firing off at how awful Hitler was, (personal communication, October 11, 2014). He really attempted to get them to connect with the material – which is understandably difficult for a course on genocides – and in the process really wanted them engaged and thinking critically about genocides and evil dictators. While it was clear to him that they were fully engaged – with many opinions on the people and events being discussed – Petyr realized that his students were still not really connecting with the material, and difficulty seeing dictators as anything other than purely evil and inhumane creatures. They were unable to truly understand what he was trying to get at, and, as Petyr put it, “perhaps it is pushing the emotional and psychological maturity of a typical 16 year old … But I get that perhaps for a lot of them that’s not where their head space is at right now,” (personal communication, October 11, 2014). In this way, trying to make history more relevant to the students may not always work in the ways we want – with difficult topics that need to be approached with sensitivity, students may have too many presuppositions to really
think differently about ideas. Similarly, in talking about issues like this, students may actually not want to be able to connect to the material, because of its horrendous nature; Petyr said that he gets this too, and that though this did not work out in quite the way he wanted it to, “some of them got it and some just didn’t connect with that at all, and I get it, yeah,” (personal communication, October 11, 2014).

Neddard finds that controversial issues that pop up in his classes can be tough to deal with in teaching history in this way. The main struggle he runs into is making sure that not only he treats these issues with sensitivity, but that his students do as well – and with their experiences, biases, and ideas, he admits that it can be a difficult feat. He gave a few examples that have happened in the past, such as “when you’re talking about residential schools, and you have Aboriginal students, or you’re talking about racism, and you have one African American kid and he thinks every time they talk about race everybody starts looking at him, right? … being at a school right now that has a huge Arabic population, how do you talk about – and I have a Civics class – how do you talk about ISIS?” (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). All of these issues require a great deal of sensitivity on the part of the teacher, and in talking about issues like these at a critical thinking level, and also in a way that connects to students requires teachers to ensure that their students are respectful and sensitive as well, and that they are prepared for the topics ahead. Like Petyr, Neddard wants his students to “talk about ideas and not the person,” (personal communication, October 14, 2014), but it can be hard for them to do this, especially with such controversial topics.

Overall, using history in this way to engage critical thinking and student engagement is full of many benefits, and while it can be hard at times to teach history in this way, it is definitely rewarding for both students and teachers, as demonstrated above throughout. There is a major
need for history teachers to focus on building a community of thinkers, and both Petyr and Neddard believe that teaching history with this content and this type of approach is the way to do it. However, as they have pointed out, it is a difficult way to teach history and help students develop all of these important skills, and the messages you try to deliver may not always be clear. This does not mean that we should not attempt to use more relevant and inclusive history when we can, just as it does not mean that we should never attempt to get our students thinking critically. Instead, we must be reflective of our lessons and processes, and constantly strive to make what did not work more successful. Social history does seem to be, at least according to Petyr and Neddard, the most effective way of engaging students and getting them thinking critically, and as such we should strive to be using in all history classrooms.
Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This final section of this research project explains and elaborates on the findings that were made in conducting this research. By making connections between the current body of literature and the information provided by the participants’ qualitative interviews, I will discuss the current perceptions presented of social history, critical thinking and student engagement within history classes. In examining these three topics, I finally answer the research question, and fully explore to what extent social history is included in Ontario history classrooms by teachers, if and how it impacts students’ critical thinking abilities, and whether or not it really engages students in learning history. The discussion has been broken down into five key points, which I feel best illustrates the current flow of the topic and its conclusions.

Point One: Teachers DO use Social History, but the Grand Narrative IS Important

As many scholars have pointed out, one of the great aspects of social history is that “modern social history has placed the experience of real human beings to the centre of its attention,” (Szijarto, 2002, page 2010). Instead of focusing on famous figures, it looks at real people, who our students are more likely to find relevant and interesting. As Neddard and Petyr mentioned throughout their interviews, they noticed that by connecting the history to the students in some way was incredibly effective in the classroom. To do this, they worked in stories of what life was like for Baby Boomers, for example (Neddard, personal communication, October 14,
2014), or had their students recreate a 1920s speakeasy (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014). Like Szijarto suggests, they often work to include the experiences of ‘real’ people in their lessons and activities, and students seem to really enjoy it. Petyr reported that many students who reportedly hated history at the start of his class came back and told him that they thought differently of the topic now, and actually liked learning the material (personal communication, October 11, 2014). To contrast, scholars like Searns talk about the grand narrative as a means of “uplifting the youth and public through stories of heroic action and political ideals,” (2003, page 9). While there are definitely plenty of examples of this throughout history, and it can be interesting at times, Petyr and Neddard’s students do not respond to it as well as historians like Searns would like. Neddard mentioned that his students generally have trouble really talking in depth about political, military, and economic history; they report that they just do not see the point in learning about great generals or the structure of early Canadian politics, because it is not interesting or relevant to them (personal communication, October 14, 2014).

However, no history class can be taught without learning the facts and context of major events or key historical figures. As Magnusson (2006) elaborates, “The grand narrative monopolizes all the attention, since academic tradition lays down as a condition that without such greater historical connections the research becomes incomprehensible” (page 907). The same can be said of any history class – without first learning the grand narrative, students would be unable to make connections between a farmer’s strife and the Great Depression, or truly understand why having a male child was so much better than having a female. The grand narrative presents us with the key information needed to better understand the nuances of everyday life and struggles, and both history teachers have realized this as well. Neddard
mentioned this specifically in his interview, saying that you cannot have students thinking about
historical concepts and thinking critically if they have no context in which to do so (personal
communication, October 14, 2014). As such, scholars and educators agree that social history is
very important to learning about history, but it does need to be balanced and used in tandem with
the grand narrative, rather than as a distinct alternative.

Point Two: It’s a (Hard) Start, but We Need More Critical Thinking in the Curriculum

The most important thing regarding critical thinking that has come out of this research is
the notion that students in any classroom, at any level, can become critical thinkers. According to
Petyr and Neddard it can be very difficult, for students and teachers (personal communications,
October 11/14, 2014), but it can be done and all students can successfully think deeply and
critically about history (Gini-Newman, 2013, lectures). As Roland Case (2013) suggests, higher-
order thinking tasks – as categorized by Bloom’s taxonomy – should go hand-in-hand with
lower-order thinking tasks, rather than being attempted only after mastery is achieved. He takes
this idea further, saying that if we are assessing for a higher-order thinking task, such as
evaluation, it should be assumed that successful students are also capable of lower-order thinking
on the same topic; there is no need to assess the lower-order thinking first (page 196). Petyr and
Neddard both look for just that – as Petyr said, if his students can argue intelligently regarding a
topic with him, or if Neddard’s students are able to justify their opinions with facts and evidence,
then both teachers realize their students have “gotten it,” and it would be pointless to test them
on how well they know the facts (personal communications, October 11/14, 2014). Both Petyr
and Neddard embody Case’s idea in the descriptions of lessons and assessments they gave to me
– Petyr in particular mentioned that he “always tries to include that critical thinking piece,”
(personal communication, October 11, 2014). As Lisa Tsui wrote, teaching students to think
critically in school is “of paramount importance, to our educational system as well as greater society,” (1999, page 185).

If critical thinking really is of paramount importance, than Petyr and Neddard, and other history teachers like them, are on the right track in educating their students. However, it is here where the curriculum, though steps have clearly been taken, still falls short of the mark. As mentioned, in going through the Ontario Curriculum for Canadian and World Studies, at both the junior (9/10) and senior (11/12) levels there was a clear preference for lower-order expectations throughout the units. This is not to say that there was no critical thinking expected of students – students are often asked to evaluate, or form an opinion, or analyze a number of times throughout the “Specific Expectations” section. The issue still present here is that tasks requiring students to simply explain or describe far outweigh those asking them to think critically in some way; moreover, the curriculum seems to set the expectations up in a way where students must be capable of this lower-order thinking work, and demonstrate mastery, before moving on. This is highly reminiscent of what Case (2013) referred to as the warping and misconstruing of Bloom’s taxonomy (page 196). Though it is great that teachers like Petyr and Neddard are trying to really get their students always thinking critically, and integrating this into their lessons and assessments, if the curriculum intends to help teachers focus their plans and provide them with goals to ensure student success, it needs to aim for a better balance of higher and lower-order thinking, similar to the way that history teachers are teaching the history courses.

**Point Three: “Doing History” is Creating a “Knowledge Network”**

In talking above about Bloom’s taxonomy, it is equally important to mention another scholar’s concept for critical thinking; namely, David Weinberger (2011) and his idea of critical
thinking as a “knowledge network,” instead of a “knowledge hierarchy”. As Fig. 2 illustrates (Appendix C), Weinberger’s model supports the idea that there are four key components to critical thinking – sharing, constructing, investigating, and reflecting. More importantly, it focuses on the idea that each of these components is equally important, and that critical thinking cannot happen without all of those four processes happening. When Neddard spoke of turning his history students into “detectives of history,” and getting them to “do” history (personal communication, October 14, 2014), I was immediately reminded of Weinberger’s concept. In having his students become detectives, Neddard makes his students 1. Share what they already know 2. Construct a story or hypothesis based on knowledge 3. Investigate the historical sources to gain context and find evidence to support their story, and 4. Reflect on what alternatives there are, or what other perspectives may be. This is, in practice, a great application of Weinberger’s theory, showing that critical thinking should involve more interconnected processes and inquiry, and less climbing from one rung to the next in a hierarchy. If more teachers can incorporate “doing” history into their lessons and assessment on a regular basis, this may be perhaps a great way to get students thinking critically and interested. Rather than learning history as casual observers they get to “do” history as historians might, which sounds to me like a much more enjoyable way of learning about history.

**Point Four: Social History Needs Greater Inclusion in Textbooks**

In talking with both Petyr and Neddard, I learned that they, along with many of their history-teaching colleagues, tend to find or create their own resources rather than use the textbooks that their classes have been provided with. In asking them to elaborate on this, Neddard responded by mentioning that the textbooks for his class are from the 1990s and very outdated (personal communication, October 14, 2014); Petyr talked about how the books his
classes have do not tend to have much in the way of critical thinking components or primary sources – he can find better during his prep time (persona communication, October 11, 2014). In researching and skimming textbooks to see if there was any truth behind their comments, I did notice that the textbooks primarily – and a majority of the time – focused on the grand narrative for whatever course was being covered. In some cases, such as in the section on the Great Depression I found in *Making History: The Story of Canada in the Twentieth Century* (2000), the history of the downtrodden and impoverished Canadians was discussed. However, the perspective covering that same story was NOT an average Canadian, and the quote that was used to describe their plight was spoken by none other than Prime Minister Bennett, one of the richest men in Canada. In drawing the focus back on to Bennett in this section, we lose the chance to give students a relevant story of Canadians just like themselves, trying to live through a tough time.

In speaking with Neddard, however, I learned that there are plenty of what he considers ‘good’ textbooks out on the market. After our interview, I did some research on the titles that he mentioned, and noticed that they all had one major thing in common – their major focus was on primary sources from each historical period, rather than the grand narrative. He spoke of textbooks like the *Canadia Scrapbooks*, and *Canadian Sources Investigated* (personal communication, October 14, 2014). Both are laden with primary sources like letters and pictures, and though he said he would not use them daily or solely on their own (personal communication, October 14, 2014), he loves to incorporate them as often as he can because they are so rich with primary sources. Petyr mentioned that he loves books that really get his students thinking critically, and that contain the critical thinking piece within them; though he did not list any in particular, he mentioned he prefers ones with a variety of sources and perspectives (personal
communication, October 11, 2014). If teachers love to use primary sources so much, and clearly prefer a textbook that is rich with sources and perspectives, then schools should be taking this into account when upgrading the supplies. Many of the books Neddard listed are relatively new – textbook writers are clearly adapting their works to better fit the way history teachers want to teach, and really getting into the notion of primary sources and critical thinking as a means of engaging students in history. And though history may be a subject where students learn about the past, the ways in which history teachers teach are constantly evolving, and all of the research has made it clear that the old, grand narrative-heavy textbooks need to be switched out with newer and more suitable texts. Just as teachers are striving for a balance between context and critical thinking, social history and grand narrative, so too must the textbooks they use.

**Point Five: Social History = Student Engagement + Critical Thinking**

The final point of discussion for this project revolves around the original research question driving the entire body of work: does social history really provide greater opportunity for students to become engaged by history and think about it critically? In thinking back to what Porter (2006) wrote, “engagement is highly correlated with learning and personal development,” (page 521), the obvious answer is immediately yes, it does. However, there is a lot more to the question besides whether or not social history allows for all this – we need to explore the questions of “How? In what way?” When Petyr talked of his students as they enter his room at the beginning of the year, he reported that the majority tend to openly dislike history, and find it irrelevant and boring (personal communication, October 11, 2014); Neddard had similar stories. Throughout the year, both teachers employ several different methods in order to get these same students to realize that history is relevant to their present lives, and that things that happened long ago still affect us today. For example, Neddard’s class does a “Personal/Family History
Project” at the start of each year, before they even start learning about any of the history to be covered in the course. In this way, Neddard allows students to learn about their own history; in doing this, he has noticed that when they come across something during the course of the year that connects to their own history they are immediately more interested, and have a greater desire to learn about it (personal communication, October 14, 2014). In a similar vein Petyr talked about how he is always trying to make it “personal and relevant” to his students’ own lives and experiences (personal communication, October 11, 2014). Like Neddard he has noticed that if they are discussing something they can actually connect to in some way, they tend to be more engaged and lively in class.

To incorporate critical thinking into all of this can be quite a challenge; Petyr and Neddard are not the first teachers to struggle in doing this, and they will not be the last. According to Cole (1990), content-heavy classes can be much easier to teach, for there is less to do in terms of developing skills with students; including critical thinking is not easy to do or quick to succeed in (page 10). Despite that, as Cole wrote, it does feel like there is something missing from a classroom where critical thinking is not happening, (page 10); the benefits far outweigh the challenges.

**Implications/Recommendations**

In doing this research, I really learned a lot about how much a teacher needs to be connected to and aware of what their students are interested in and doing; as Petyr said, it is all about understanding “where their head space is at,” (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014). In being connected to my students and their interests, I may be able to find ways to engage them that I had not thought of previously, like Petyr does in his classes. In terms of my teaching,
I feel that this means that I do need to really make sure that I connect with all of my students; if this research project has taught me anything, it is that engagement is essential to having successful history classes and getting students really into the history. Within my teaching practice I should actively aim to include aspects of social history in my daily lessons, as well as in any assessments that I give. Even in my limited experience, I have seen that when I connect the history to something the students can relate to, they are more involved and excited to learn about whatever it is I am teaching; with assessments, they tend to put in more effort and be more proud of their product as well. When students feel like what they are learning about actually affects them, as Neddard and Petyr have observed firsthand, they are more likely to really think deeply and carefully about it (Petyr, personal communication, October 11, 2014).

Similarly, I feel like this could have many implications on the Ontario history curriculum and how it treats social history and critical thinking. This research project did examine the history curriculum for both the junior and senior high school grades, and while I was delighted to see that both were included within all levels and all courses – across the spectrum of history classes in high school – it was also clear that there is a distinct imbalance between this method of teaching history and the ‘grand narrative’ approach. There is still a very large focus on describing, explaining, and close-ended questions. While a more open-ended and inquisitive approach is present at times, it can be easily overshadowed by the alternative. As a teacher who is still getting used to the curriculum and relies heavily on it for guidance with lessons and objectives, oftentimes it appears that this close-ended explanatory approach is valued more just based on how prevalent it is; this alone could lead to it staying dominant in the classrooms if teachers are not aware or still unsure of their own footing in a course. These curriculum documents are newly revised, or in the process of being revised – as Neddard commented, they
have changed a lot for the better, and a greater critical thinking piece was introduced along with opportunities for more relevant and social history. Some new textbooks are even being released that are heavily supported by the curriculum documents and include all of these engaging pieces (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). The suggestion that stems from this, along with Neddard and Petyr’s complaints that they do not always have access to the newest and greatest of textbooks (personal communications, October 11/14, 2014), would be for the province to provide this access for history teachers – be it through purchasing class sets for schools that need a little extra help with funding, or creating a digitally downloadable file for teachers to access online, as we are already able to with the curriculum document itself. History teachers have often had to resort to finding their own material and sources for their lessons (personal communications, October 11/14, 2014). Doing something like this just allows for more of the same, and pre-aligns the sources with the curriculum expectations, thus ensuring that students would be taught and learning exactly what they need to in order to succeed. I feel that this would undoubtedly guarantee more success for students in history classes, as well as make the work for the teacher a little easier, which would then give them the ability to focus their time on other aspects of their history teaching practice.

The results of this study also have some pretty interesting implications regarding what must be done in terms of training pre-service history teachers to become the best educators they can be. I was fortunate enough to have a history education professor who lives and breathes student engagement and critical thinking, and so he made sure to teach each and every one of us the value of teaching our students how to think critically, and provided us with plenty of demonstrations for how to engage students in a history class. I also realize that this will definitely not be the case for every pre-service history teacher in the province. Many may have
very little experience in teaching students to think critically; many may have also never been engaged in their own high school history classes, and may not know what this actually looks like. As such, I feel that there should be some sort of support system for new teachers of history, to help them fully understand the new curriculum, as well as provide support in creating engaging lessons that get the students to think critically. I know that as a pre-service teacher this was something that I struggled with myself, and on reflecting on some of those early lessons it is clear that I could have done so much more to engage my students. My first exposure to social history and history that is relevant to the average person was not until university, where the classroom style and atmosphere is extremely different from that of a high school; as such, I had no idea of what this looks like in a high school classroom. According to Neddard, I am not the only one – many conferences have been held by history teachers around the world just to determine what ‘this’ – engaged students and critically thinking students – looks like in a typical classroom (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). With some sort of support system for teachers – especially pre-service and new teachers – I feel like we will all be better prepared to authentically and meaningfully educate our students of history.

Limitations & Next Steps

It is important to remember that the main limitations of this study were its size, and the fact that only qualitative interviews were conducted. In this research project, only two Ontario high school history teachers were interviewed, out of the thousands that teach across the province. So, while the data they provided is very important, and it lends insight into how history is taught by teachers, this same insight is very limited because of the small size of the study. If a further study were to be done in this area, it definitely needs to be a study of a much larger scale – more history teachers need to be interviewed on their methods and beliefs, to see if this idea of
using social history and critical thinking is something that is prevalent across the province. While unlikely, the two participants I used for this study could have both been anomalies when it comes to teaching history, and the standard across Ontario could be much different from what was described to me for this study. Dealing with a larger participant pool and hearing more stories would do well to prove or disprove the conclusions made in this first study. I feel that it would also be important to include more and different types of data to analyze and examine in subsequent studies. The only method of data collection completed for this study was qualitative interviews, as per the requirements for the project. However, I feel that for future studies, a good idea may be to have a larger number of history teachers fill out surveys answering questions on their opinions on critical thinking, social history, and engaging students. In this way, future studies could be a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research; this would focus on a larger number of history teachers, but also still provide for personal stories and sharing of teaching experiences and practices.

An essential next step for further study in this area of research, I feel, would be to interview and discuss this field with the older teachers of history, who went to school and started teaching before this notion of social history became so prominent. As Neddard mentioned in discussion of critical thinking conferences and the recent inclusion of the topics of this research project in the curriculum, “I think some of your older teachers will just continue to teach the way they want, because they’ve got what they got,” (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). As a Department Head, Neddard mentioned that he has seen older colleagues of his who are still very textbook-reliant and who do not attempt to engage or get the students thinking critically – they do a lot of textbook reading and fact retention, with tests to assess their knowledge. While he did admit that this is “sort of a stereotypical statement,” (personal
communication, October 14, 2014), it was a trend that he had noticed, at least at the schools he worked at. Similarly, he told me that at the conferences he had attended most of the teachers were younger like him, or new into the field of teaching. As such, I would like to continue in this field of research, but by looking at teachers who have been teaching for a much longer period of time, and are closer to their retirement than the ones interviewed for this study. This would be done to learn about their teaching practices and ideas of critical thinking, social history, and student engagement, and see if they match up to what Neddard has experienced.

Another step to be taken would be to take a much more extensive look at the Ontario curriculum to see how it included social history and critical thinking within its units. While I did a basic examination of them for this study, they should be analyzed in a much greater depth, to see if there are any opportunities for growth of these areas within the curriculum already being used. The textbooks assigned for each course should also be studied and analyzed, to see if they have a sufficient amount of primary sources, critical thinking tasks, and social history sections. Naturally, what is “sufficient” would have to be determined, which may require greater collaboration between the textbooks and the curriculum, as well as further research into an optimal balance between critical thinking tasks, factual information, and more of a subjective analysis of history. As Neddard perfectly phrased it, “you can’t do critical thinking unless you have a certain amount of knowledge either. If you give them a bunch of different sources on an event or topic, and they have no kind of context for it, then it falls flat. So you have to set it up – so you usually have to give them the background information, and be general,” (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). In this way, it would become possible to see where there is room to add these components to the curriculum, and further embed it in the Ontario history program.
Overall, this study was a great first step into the intersection of critical thinking, student engagement, and incorporating social history, but there is plenty more work to be done. This study has made it clear that history teachers are thinking about these concepts together, and that work has been done to bring them all into the Ontario curriculum. The study also showed that there are challenges for teachers in teaching a more engaging and inclusive history, and that it is a difficult way to teach, especially if students have not been prepped for it in prior history classes or have had very little chance to think critically and discuss history as an interpretative subject. Teaching this way, as Petyr and Neddard pointed out, takes a lot of preparation and practice on the part of the teachers, and also a lot of diagnostic work in the beginning to gauge where each individual student is at, and what the class as a whole can handle (Neddard, personal communication, October 14, 2014). Ultimately, teaching history in this way does require a lot of work and effort from everyone involved, but when students are able to form opinions on a difficult concept, and make contextual connections and truly demonstrate that they can do history and have learned, I feel that the rewards far outweigh the challenges.
References


Appendix A: Letter of Informed Consent

Date: __________________________

Dear __________________________.

My name is Liane Hanson, and I am currently enrolled as a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), at the University of Toronto, as a Master of Teaching candidate. As per the requirements for degree completion and conferral I am investigating and researching a topic within the field of education as part of our major assignment, the Masters of Teaching Research Project. I am studying the incorporation and encouragement of social history by secondary school teachers within their history classrooms, and I believe that your knowledge and experience with this particular area will provide valuable insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who has been guiding us and supporting us with our research progress this year is Dr. Patrick Finnessey, and my research supervisor is [insert supervisor’s name here]. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research, and successfully investigate and report on a problem within the field of educational research. My data collection will consist of a face-to-face interview that will last for up to 60 minutes, as well as potential follow-up communication through email interaction. The interview will be tape-recorded, and I will be taking some handwritten notes as well. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time that is convenient for you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you may prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that could potentially identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications; this information will remain confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment and work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You will be able to withdraw from my study at any point in time, and can change your mind even after consenting to participate. You can also decline to answer any of my interview questions, and no explanation or reasoning will be required. I will destroy the voice recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to five years after the data is initially collected. There are minimal risks and benefits to you for assisting with this project, and I will share my notes with you to ensure accuracy and correctness.
If you are willing to aid me in my educational research and be interviewed for my project, please sign the attached form. The second copy is for you to keep in your records. Thank you very much for your assistance.

Yours Sincerely,

Researcher’s Name: Liane Hanson

Phone #, Email Address: 647-473-0656; liane.hanson@mail.utoronto.ca

Instructor’s Name: Dr. Patrick Finnessey.
Email Address: pk.finnessy@utoronto.ca
Phone Number: 416.978.0078

Research Supervisor’s Name: Dr. Garfield Gini-Newman
Email Address: ggininewman.gini.newman@utoronto.ca
Phone Number: 416.978.0193

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Liane Hanson and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (Printed): __________________________________

Date: _____________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

The purpose of this interview is to gain a greater understanding of how a high school history teacher teaches their classes. I want to see how teachers try get their students thinking critically about the material, and what tools and methods they try to keep their students engaged. Before I directly ask them about social history, I will start off with some introductory questions, and learn about their history classes in general; my questions aim to gauge whether they use social history or not, and act accordingly from there.

Background Questions

1. Could you describe your post-secondary background for me?
2. What influenced your decision to become a history teacher?
3. For how many years have you been a secondary school teacher?
4. Have you ever taught at the elementary or post-secondary level?
5. Can you tell me a little about your favourite history class to teach and what makes it so special?
6. Have you ever taught anywhere – within Canada or internationally – where history was approached in a different way?
   a. If so, could you elaborate on what the differences were?

Lessons/ Critical Thinking Questions
1. Tell me about an average day within one of your history classrooms. (Lessons, mental hooks, activities, discussions, etc.).

2. Think back to what you feel was one of the greatest lessons or classes you’ve given. Can you tell me what you were doing and what made it so special and memorable?

3. To contrast, can you tell me about a lesson that went disastrously wrong and why you think it happened?

4. How has your teaching practice been shaped and changed over the years?

5. I’ve often heard that one of the hardest things a teacher does is to really get their kids to think. How do you get your students to really think critically in your classroom?

6. Have you noticed that critical thinking is perceived differently now than when you first started out teaching?
   
   a. How has your view on critical thinking changed since you first started?

7. How do you gauge if a student is successfully thinking critically?
   
   a. What do they have to show you or demonstrate as evidence of this type of thinking?

8. What are some of the greatest challenges that you have found in trying to encourage students be active and engaged in thinking critically?

Curriculum/Textbook Questions

1. How closely would you say that you follow what is outlined in the curriculum for each of your classes?
   
   a. How do you “space everything out?” (ie. How do you give everything equal treatment from all subjects, or do you focus on some things more than others?)
2. How much of a fan are you of the textbooks provided for your history classes?
   
   a. Why/why do you not like them?

3. How well do you think the curriculum and textbooks allow for students to think critically?

4. How well do you think the textbook and curriculum engage students in the material?
   
   a. Ask about some positives/negatives.

Social History Questions

1. I’ve heard from some teachers that one way to get students more interested in history is to teach them about things that are more relevant to them in some way. Have you ever tried to do this in your lessons and classes?
   
   a. How do you feel this impacted your students, either positively or negatively?

2. How well do you think that more relevant history could be combined or included in your lessons and classes?
   
   a. How would you approach this sort of inclusion in your classroom?
   b. What sorts of benefits do you think successfully including this type of history would have for your students?
   c. What sorts of problems could you foresee arising from this type of combination?

3. Earlier I asked you about the greatest challenges you faced in getting your students to be engaged and thinking critically. Do you think that including some history that is more relevant or ‘interesting’ could help in facing this challenge?
   
   a. Why do you think it can/cannot help in this endeavour?
Appendix C: Figures

**Figure 1. Bloom's Taxonomy**

**Figure 2. Weinberger's "Knowledge Network"**