Humanizing and Contextualizing the Social Studies: Historical Fiction in Elementary School Classrooms

By

Kelsey Kearns

A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
For the degree of Master of Teaching
Abstract

Educational pedagogy is aimed at bettering classroom experiences for both teachers and students alike. Social studies such as history and geography are traditionally approached by educators as being fact-based and as such, so are their teachings. This research project sheds light on the notion of using historical fiction picture books and novels to bring to life elements of social studies that are often overlooked. This paper will highlight the importance of engaging students in their learning through a series of understandable and relatable characters that are found within the pages of historical fiction books.

Key words: social studies, literature, historical fiction, student success
Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge and thank my research professors, Hilary Inwood and Ken McNeilly for providing me with the confidence and ability to move forward with my research. Their undivided support and encouragement has allowed this project to become one of the purest reflections of myself as an educator.

I would like to thank my parents, who have also unknowingly inspired me to continue along my path regardless of how difficult it can be.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank my three participants who took time out of their busy schedules to work with me and help me to create this project.

Lastly, I would like to say the biggest thank you of all to the members of my cohort here at OISE. Together we learned, we laughed, we cried and most of all, we succeeded. I can do nothing but wish them each the best of luck in the future and to thank them for helping me to create mine.
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1: Introduction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0 Introduction to the Research Study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Research Questions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Background of the Researcher</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Overview</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2: Literature Review</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction to the Chapter</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Humanization of Social Studies</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Students Ability to Relate to Content</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 American Influences on Canadian Literature</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Student Centered Learning</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Teacher Roles in Using Historical Fiction</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Connecting Social Studies and Literature</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 Conclusion</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction 24
3.1 Research Approach and Procedures 24
3.2 Instruments of Data Collection 25
3.3 Participants 26
   3.3.1 Sampling Criteria 26
   3.3.2 Participant Recruitment/Procedures 27
   3.3.3 Participant Biographies 28
3.4 Data Analysis 29
3.5 Ethical Review Procedures 30
3.6 Methodological limitations and Strengths 31
3.7 Conclusion 32

Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction 33
4.1 Generating Student Interest using a Variety of Instructional Strategies 34
   4.1.1 The Need for Emotional Pedagogy 35
4.2 Technology in the Classroom: 21st Century Learning 36
   4.2.1 Historical Fiction and Media: Bridging the Gap 37
4.3 Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Elementary Schools 38
   4.3.1 Connections between Past and Present 38
4.4 Cross Curricular Connections in Social Studies 40
   4.4.1 Unpacking Historical Fiction within Traditional Fiction 40
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

When Canadians think of the Hudson’s Bay Company, most will picture a department store filled with clothing, shoes, accessories, home furnishings and so on. Few will remember that the Hudson’s Bay Company was the first chartered trading post in Canada, which allowed our new society to grow and develop into one of the leading global superpowers. The reason for this is the lack of contextualization of Canadian and global history in our classrooms. The complexity of social studies generally creates learning barriers for students that are often disconnected from the material that they are learning. Consequently, many students lack a deepened understanding of history.

The incorporation of historical fiction into the teaching of elementary school social studies is a growing phenomenon in education, as highlighted in chapter two. Using alternative methods of teaching social studies, such as the use of historical fiction, can emphasize the cross-curricular elements of studying history that is often overlooked. For instance, recent studies have shown that the two-fold effect of using historical fiction can not only bring to light social studies concepts but allow students to see and understand the consequences of human actions through literary analysis (Nawrott, 1996). Using multidimensional methods of instruction is a beneficial approach that can encourage students to become successful learners through the development of critical thinking strategies. The issue of students feeling disconnected from the learning of social studies is nothing new. However, the integration of non-traditional teaching methods such as re-enactments, plays, narratives and the use of historical fiction have begun to rise in popularity due to their success within the classroom (Dunn, 2000).
1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine and understand the complexity of teaching social studies and bring to light new and innovative ways of improving the learning of students in this area. Various studies have determined what happens when students cannot personally or emotionally relate to a subject, typically it gets forgotten and is replaced with something relevant, recurring or more interesting (Bilof, 1996). According to Dunn (2000), it is the role of educators to provide students with the tools to make social studies engaging, interactive and most of all relatable. The diversity of Canadian geography and history needs to be remembered and celebrated and therefore it is essential that students can connect to the subjects that they are learning in school. In this sense, this study is to analyze and interpret the uses of historical fiction and the potential benefits it can create for students, such as a deepened understanding of social studies.

The overall Canadian social studies curriculum places emphasis on each grade level to be able to inquire, understand and relate all subject matter to the required ‘big idea’. The big ideas discussed within the curriculum range from understanding local communities, global nations and world history, as well as first settler and aboriginal culture in Canada. Possession of the abilities to contextualize information, to form theories and to analyze facts is necessary for student success both inside and outside of the classroom.

In order to facilitate this type of learning, Gibson and Tranter (1998) argue that approaching these new teaching strategies as co-teaching opportunities is a way in which educators can collaborate to create new classroom environments for students that may not have
been utilized before. Sharing the workload with co-workers, as stated by Waters (1999) is something that most teachers should be striving for regardless of the subject at hand. There are many possible ways in which teachers can use historical fiction in their classes, however, giving teachers the tools, resources and professional development needed to make these important shifts in social studies learning is the first step to making changes. Too often we suggest improvements that should be made to better the learning of students which are rarely followed up with tangible and useful means. Therefore by engaging educators in a conversation about the gaps between curriculum instruction and student success in social studies, I hope to better understand how historical fiction potentially improve classroom dynamics and enrich student learning by humanizing the events being studied.

1.2 Research Questions

To examine and understand the benefits of using historical fiction as an effective teaching tool for social studies at the elementary level, we must first ask the key question: Does the use of historical fiction influence student understanding of the social studies curriculum?

In order to successfully answer this question, I will be focusing on the perspectives of elementary school teachers and their current and past experiences teaching social studies. With the establishment of this main question, as a researcher seeking to understand the details of this study, other questions come to mind to provide depth into this subject. For instance, how does historical fiction enhance student’s personal connections to the subject matter? What cross-curricular connections might historical fiction generate? How does the instruction of historical
HUMANIZING AND CONTEXTUALIZING THE SOCIAL STUDIES: HISTORICAL FICTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

fiction differ from that of traditional fiction? What is the instructional approach most commonly used by educators to teach the current social studies curriculum in elementary schools?

These questions provide context into the main issue at hand, which is enhancing and enriching student learning by incorporating historical fiction into elementary school social studies classrooms.

1.3 Background of the Researcher

I attended high school in the province of Quebec. Quebec’s Ministry of Education requires all grade ten students to take a standardized provincial history test. This test is a graduation requirement and is comprised of multiple choice and short answer questions. I studied for two months for this exam and was surprised to receive 100%. This test made me see history in a different way; I was excited and motivated to continue learning about national and global history. The following year, I was placed into an enriched history and English class called Fact and Fiction. During the history part of the class, we looked at historical timelines, facts, concepts and more, whereas in the fiction component of the course, we did novel studies on books that were historically based and relevant to the Quebec curriculum. This class was small and very personalized, and although the historical component was mostly memorization, the language element was much more than that. Thriving in this environment was yet another encouragement for me to pursue my post-secondary education in History.

I began my undergraduate career shortly after this class and quickly went from an A average to a C average. The realization that the intimacy of my high school class was not part of my undergrad and that the study of history required much more than rote memorization, left me
shocked. Unfortunately, I struggled for almost three years with the critical analysis of themes, events and concepts in my undergrad. I was frustrated that the dream I had about becoming a history teacher was neither what I had expected nor what I had prepared for. Unsurprisingly, I had developed a negative stance against learning history and my grades had suffered because of it.

Thankfully, I began reading a historical fiction novel about Stalin’s regime in my spare time and my opinion about history began to change once again. Not only was I enthralled by this book but suddenly so many of the historical concepts I had struggled to understand made sense, this was a moment of clarity for me because everything I had been learning came together and clicked into place. The way this novel had humanized the struggles of the people of Soviet Russia was the first time that history made sense to me since high school on a personal and emotional level. My passion for history has since been reignited as I have continued with my education and have begun to develop my own teaching philosophy as well.

Theories about why students struggle with understanding and retaining the information in social studies began to develop and I realized that incorporating historical fiction into classroom instruction may deepen and enrich students learning. By altering social studies instruction to reflect real life stories may help students to achieve their maximum potential while also fostering critical thinking skills.

The axiological philosophical belief, according to Creswell (2013), places emphasis on predetermined values and understands the relationship that creates between the data and the researcher, as well as amongst the participants of the study. The past experiences I have had in the field of social studies, as well as education, place me, as a researcher as part of the
axiological philosophical belief. The set value that education should be rich in experience and contextualized learning will undoubtedly frame my research narrative. Furthermore, the balance between my values, as well as the values of the participants of this study, combined with my interest in seeking the outcome of my research questions create a pragmatic interpretive framework for my study. To efficiently study the potential value of historical fiction in the classroom, I will look to two main qualitative methods of obtaining data including interviews and study based research to formulate and support my theories regarding the benefits of using historical fiction in the social studies at the elementary school level.

In my opinion, the most effective way to approach this study would be to pursue my research as a case study. A case study will allow me to effectively analyze and familiarize myself with the complexity of this social studies education issue through a small number of participants that are studied at great detail, hence providing me with thorough information that I can use to highlight theories and ideas related to my research (Stake 1995). As a researcher it is my goal to understand the relationship between social studies and the people who are involved in its implementation. It is with that understanding that I can aim to bridge the gap between learner interest and engagement in the social studies curriculum. Although, according to Stake, case studies are typical small in number the amount of in depth information provided by the participants allows researchers to truly invest themselves in the project on a personal level. I feel that with a case study, I will achieve the most understanding as to how educators feel about the use of historical fiction in their classrooms as well as how engaging students in the humanization of history could prove to be beneficial.
According to Yin (1989), a case study provides the researcher with context for a real-life phenomenon after asking the how and why of social studies and historical fiction based lessons. My pragmatic approach combined with my passion and investment into the betterment of student achievement in the social studies at the elementary school level, will foster the continued development of early age critical thinking through the use of historical fiction.

1.4 Overview

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 identifies the participants in the study and describes the data as it addresses the research question. Chapter 5 includes limitations of the study, conclusions, recommendations for practice, and further reading and study. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine and understand the benefits of using historical fiction as an effective teaching tool for social studies at the elementary level. Furthermore, this study aims to answer the question of whether or not the use of historical fiction influences student understanding of the social studies curriculum.

2.1 Introduction

The theories that support the use of historical fiction to build and develop a historical narrative within a classroom are continuously growing and gaining ground in the field of social studies research. It is recognizable and arguable that humanizing history through stories and narratives create longer lasting impressions on students on both a personal and academic level. Researchers such as Nawrot (1996), Dunn (2000) and Pantaleo (2000) and many more have theorized the benefits of using historical fiction to increase student success within the social studies. Education is about creating a learning space for students to expand their knowledge, while also simultaneously building life skills such as critical thinking. It is my belief that the incorporation of historical fiction within a social studies classroom at the primary level will merit higher student success. However, despite the continued development of research supporting non-traditional teaching strategies in the social studies, this theory is still limited.

Existing research presents a strong case in favour of using non-traditional social studies teaching methods. However, many articles are abstract in their arguments and have little to no
substantial data to support the idea of implementing historical fiction into a social studies classroom. The seeming cause for the lack of research and development of data is the fact that these theories are still emerging and gaining ground in their respective fields. Although the concept of using historical fiction as a tool for teaching social studies is not new, educators across the globe are only now beginning to report on the successes and failures of this new age approach. It is also critical to mention the ever-growing database of children’s books that address a number of contemporary social studies issues (Pantaleo, 2002). According to Pantaleo, children’s books have a larger variance of topics now than even just 10 years ago, allowing teachers to select picture books or novels that expand on their own ideas within the classroom. The combination of an increase in available texts, recent publications as well as a modernization of the curriculum for social studies has helped to broaden the teaching scope for many educators. This also allows students to benefit from a cross curricular pedagogy, resulting in stronger retention of information, a better understanding of abstract concepts, and an overall increase in motivation amongst students at the primary level.

2.2 The Humanization of Social Studies

The humanization of the social studies through historical fiction and narratives provide readers with context into the lives of the characters as well as providing them with real life, tangible facts. Arguments in favour of the humanization of social studies link the integration of this strategy with the overall student success (Wheeler, 1971). Traditional teaching methods in typical social studies environments can often place more emphasis on abstract ideas without concrete activities that bridge the gap between theory and practice (Swan, Hofer & Locascio, 2007). An article published in 1996 by Kathy Nawrot argues that students recalled 60% more
information when they were taught using historical fiction rather than traditional texts. Therefore, it is arguable that a gap exists between the information presented in textbooks and the type of information that is real and applicable to student’s lives. The effect of humanizing social studies by using historical fiction is twofold. In one respect, students will learn more academically and be more engaged with the material, but in another respect, they will also begin to develop non-academic related skills, such as compassion and empathy.

It is through the humanization of historical content that teachers can aim to bring these stories to life within the classroom (Waters, 1999). Researchers (Wheeler, 1971) argue that by studying the lives of a character, students will be able to feel and experience the same emotions as the people in the stories. This type of learning not only integrates literary techniques, such as “text to self analysis”, but also awakens students’ sense of responsibility and morality within a larger global context (Nawrot, 1996, Fuhler, 1991). Teaching social studies can be challenging for a number of reasons. Teachers with strong philosophical beliefs regarding traditionally marginalized societies may find elements of the mandated curriculum to be difficult to implement. In Canada, many educators believe that there needs to be more Aboriginal content in the teaching of social studies. Tarc (2011) argues that historical fiction has the ability to connect marginalized societies, such as Aboriginals, into relevant and current classroom discussions. Gibson and Tranter (1998) link the need of cross curricular teaching, such as bringing together social studies and language, back to the philosophy of educational reformist John Dewey, who theorized that segregating subjects is not beneficial to students due to the argument that the learning of each subject happens simultaneously.
2.3 Students Ability to Relate to Content

Finding social studies material to teach primary students that is relatable and grounded in academic content can be a difficult task for most teachers. However, recent studies have begun to recognize the need for these tools within the classroom, particularly at the elementary level (Waters, 1999). Using literature to aid in the teaching of new concepts makes content more relevant to the lives and needs of students, regardless of abilities (Waters). Sparking an interest in any given topic requires the students to sense familiarity within the subject, which can be done through picture books, short stories, and novels as well as videos, dramatizations and role playing activities (Flaim & Chiado, 1994). The relatability of the social studies content has a major influence on students’ learning and achievement in the classroom. Waters argues that creating and implementing relatable content facilitates the learning of abstract social studies concepts, while also engaging students on an emotional level. One author, Sandman (2004), argues that using contemporary books to teach social studies is an excellent way to create a sense of understanding and accountability to a young audience. Books about current war torn countries are often more relevant to modern students as they discuss current day issues both at home and abroad. Part of creating a relatable lesson or unit within the social studies curriculum is, as discussed by Rycik and Rosler (2009), through connecting students’ emotions to the content. Creating an environment in which students are invested in the wellbeing of the characters they are studying can change classroom dynamic and motivation, resulting in a better outcome for both students and teachers. This argument is further explained by Fulhers’ (1991) discussion of how historical narratives cultivate a sense of welcoming and belonging of the reader into a different global perspective. Making connections to times and places are the essence of learning
social studies and how we, as educators, can achieve this is through the incorporation and support of historical fiction within the classroom (Flaim & Chiado).

2.4 American Influences on Canadian Literature

Although incorporating historical fiction into social studies instruction may be a favourable strategy, it undoubtedly requires a significant amount of research by educators in order to ensure that only books of superior quality are being used within the classroom. With regards to current studies and literature, there are few resources available to teachers in the Canadian context. Many articles found in my own literature review, focus on elements of social studies that are inconsequential to primary students in Canada due to their American basis. Each mandated provincial curriculum requires educators to cover a variety of subjects that are vital to Canadian history and geography, in addition to global issues. Each article I came across in my review of the literature, graciously lists teacher resources at the end of their study or argument. However, few of these resources are useful for Canadian teachers because they do not necessarily connect to the topics found within a Canadian classroom. Therefore, the majority of the academic literature regarding the use of historical fiction is limiting to Canadian teachers. Therefore, Canadian teachers can only use this research to evaluate and understand theoretical ideas and concepts behind each study. Without providing tangible resources that could support Canadian teachers in beginning to integrate non-traditional teaching methods, such as the use of literary novel studies on historical fiction books, educators and students alike are found at a disadvantage.
2.5 Student Centered Learning

A growing phenomenon in current teaching practices is the concept of student centered learning. This strategy stems from Vygotsky’s socialization theory, in which students learn best when socializing either formally or informally with one another (Chick, 2006). This type of learning is driven by student motivation with regards to any given subject. In the social studies, students will inquire and engage with a topic depending on its relatability to themselves, as well as by their genuine interest in the subject. It is an educator’s job to facilitate this type of learning by providing background knowledge and context of the subject matter, while also ensuring that a variety of learning tools, such as historical fiction, are available to students (Chick). Thomas (2011) furthers this argument by explaining that with the use of literacy instruction, educators are also contributing to inquiry based learning, a type of learning in which students possess the tools to further investigate a topic. Ideally, all classrooms should engage students in this manner, regardless of the subject; however, social studies classrooms can benefit greatly by this inquiry based learning approach. In a case study done by Dunn (2000), one teacher created a special interest project in which students would pick their area of interest and throughout the year, research and develop their topic using the lens of that particular social studies unit. This type of activity combines student centered learning as well as inquiry based learning, both of which are supported even further by historical fiction novel study. Dunn regards the culmination of each of these instructional strategies to be a turning point for students with regards to their overall engagement in social studies. Unfortunately, this particular case was done in the United States with a junior high school grade and is therefore not directly related to Canadian elementary schools. However, it is not impossible to imagine a way in which these ideas and concepts may
be applied in a manner that is more relatable to the Canadian primary teacher. Wright (1998) argues that student collaboration can be also be a bridge point between various opinions amongst students, and therefore aid in the establishment of unbiased perceptions and ways of thinking. These critical skills are not only applicable to a social studies classroom, but can be beneficial for students in a cross-curricular sense as well. Social studies classrooms that incorporate historical fiction have a varied number of potential learning activities that can be used to generate genuine interest as well as natural inquiry into an assortment of learned topics.

2.6 Teacher Roles in Using Historical Fiction

Many researchers and educators have asked the question “how do I use this strategy in my classroom?” There are many ways in which non-traditional teaching methods can be used in the context of social studies instruction in the classroom. For instance, Thomas (2011) discussed the importance of co-teaching, both within the same grade as well as with higher grades. Co-teaching, according to Thomas, is working with colleagues to create effective lesson and unit plans that are centered on student success. It is his argument that teachers need to know what other teachers, both at the same grade level and not, are doing in order to avoid duplicate lessons and to ensure students are meeting the required level of knowledge by the end of their grade. In regards to obtaining resources, especially those related to Canadian historical fiction and narratives, Waters (1999) suggests that fellow colleagues are essential to obtaining quality historical fiction resources. Furthermore, Thomas argues that school administration should also be on the same page as teachers when it comes to incorporating non-traditional methods. This ensures that the path to classroom and student success is clear and unobstructed, therefore allowing teachers to become creative in their instructional strategies.
With the establishment of a classroom that is student centered and inquiry based, teachers must ensure that they have adequate knowledge of the topic they are teaching (Thomas, 2011). It is arguable, according to Thomas, that with proper training of teacher candidates, classrooms will continue to shift towards a new paradigm that supports literature based social studies learning. This shift in learning environments will also allow teachers to differentiate lessons for students of different abilities with greater ease due to a larger number of historical fiction publications that vary in reading ability (Williams et al., 2014). This technique will allow lower level and higher-level students to partake in the same lesson as their peers without much additional planning from the teacher.

Teachers play a crucial role in the success or failure of a new strategy, Williams et al. (2014) argues that often times, the historical fiction books that are selected by the teacher for a unit or lesson are more vital than the actual lesson activities themselves. Students need to engage with the text first before any other learning and inquiry can occur (Youngs, 2012). Teachers who are willing to establish trust and security in their classrooms will also find that their students will be more engaged and willing to learn more about social studies (Nawrot, 1996). This level of comfort and trust, as explained by Youngs, allow for a free flowing discussion between students and teachers with regards to various text interpretations and understandings. Ultimately, in order for the incorporation of historical fiction based classrooms to be successful, educators must have a grounded understanding of the concept, as well as administrative and collegial support for their non-traditional strategies (Dunn, 2000).
2.7 Connecting Social Studies and Literature

Literacy instruction has a number of techniques that can also be applied to a social studies classroom. For instance, reading for meaning and reading for understanding are important concepts within a literary classroom. Educators require students to read a text and then analyse a character’s thoughts or actions. According to Youngs (2012), the same can and should be done when looking at historical picture books, narratives or novels. This cross-curricular way of instructing social studies is beneficial to the growth of a student’s ability to think critically about a text and to dissect the words in order to obtain meaning (Sandmann, 2004). Through the lens of social studies, students using texts to deepen their understanding of abstract concepts can do so by reading about a relatable character in a setting that is engaging yet central to the learning of a social studies topic. Literature circles, novel studies and analysis of visual images are all elements of literature that can be used to further the teaching of social studies in a manner that is most beneficial for students (Youngs).

With regards to developing critical thinking skills in students when reading a novel or short story, educators must also be mindful of the fictional aspect of historical fiction. Rysick and Rosler (2009) explain that by unintentionally over-emphasising on the historical elements of fiction books and disregarding the fictitious features, student may misinterpret the message and overall value of the novel. While it is important to take a critical stance with these books, it is also important not to focus entirely on the literary elements of a novel as it will impede the overall historical message of the book or story (Bilof, 1996).
2.8 Conclusion

Overall, the literature surrounding the use of historical fiction in the classrooms has shown the tremendous development of this topic over the last 20 years. The expansion of the social studies to include cross-curricular elements such as fiction and nonfiction literature is representative of a changing paradigm. This new age of social studies is more student-centered and focused on the acquisition of knowledge, while also developing important learning skills. However, there are undoubtedly areas of this literature that need further development. For instance, there is a tremendous lack of resources, articles and studies in Canadian contexts. Current research is based entirely out of the United States and is largely about junior and senior high school levels. This may be because elementary leveled curriculum is more focused on establishing the fundamentals of learning with regards to each subject, whereas high school is seemingly more centered on incorporating critical thought within the school context. Historical fiction is a relatively new topic that seems to only be beginning to gain ground in the realm of education. Therefore, the establishment of a clearly defined and commonly agreed upon stance with regards to the use of historical fiction would create stability amongst educators, resulting in greater clarity when introducing it into the classroom. My goal is to shed light on this contemporary social studies issue in a more Canadian context by talking to current and past classroom teachers about their experiences with using alternative methods for teaching social studies. Ideally I would like to open this study to the possibility of extending it to include a classroom case study in which student success is measured before and after the implementation of historical fiction teaching strategies.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a detailed explanation of my research approach as well as methodology that is related to the continued growth and development of this research study. Furthermore, I will provide information with regards to data collection and the instruments used to collect information. Later in this chapter, I will provide critical material regarding participant criteria, sampling and recruitment procedures to allow for further understanding and context into the research question. Subsequently this chapter will discuss data analysis and ethical considerations I have taken into account in order to demonstrate my commitment to this study as well as its participants. Furthermore, this chapter will go on to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of my methodology. Finally the conclusion of this chapter will consist of a brief summary of all key methodological approaches coupled with my rationale for choosing to pursue my study in this particular manner.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study was conducted using a qualitative approach, which also includes a detailed literature review as well as data collection done by conducting semi-structured interviews with professionals in education who have knowledge and understanding of the Ontario social studies curriculum. The purpose of using a qualitative approach is that it will provide small scale yet in-depth details regarding the use of historical fiction in elementary school classrooms. Qualitative research has allowed me to understand and contextualize the
issues of student engagement and course relatability from the first hand experiences of professionals in the field (Merriam, 2009)

As discussed by Denscombe (2007), qualitative research has a realm of possibilities and allows researchers to bring meaning to the data they are collecting as well as to examine and understand various different perspectives related to the research question at hand.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary form of data collection for this project was semi-structured interviews. This semi-structured interview protocol was an effective tool for analyzing and exploring information provided by participants during the data collection process. Krueger & Casey (2009), mentioned that semi-structured interviews are effective tools for understanding the real life experiences of participants while also allowing for continued growth of the research problem as these interviews are non-restrictive for the research questions.

The semi-structured interview format also provided me with an avenue, to explore unexpected topics or potential new concepts. For this reason, the selected interview questions (Appendix B) were be left open ended in order to allow for this potential expansion of the data collection process.

3.3 Participants

This section provides information related to my process of participant selection and the establishment the desired sampling criteria for the framework of this study. Additionally, I elaborate on my sampling procedures and participant recruitment and the avenues in which I plan
to pursue them. I have also included a section in which I will introduce each of my participants in order to provide context into their involvement in this study.

### 3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

For the purpose of this study, I looked for specific sampling criteria amongst my participants:

Participants had to have been working or involved in elementary schools in some respect for at least two years. Focusing my sampling criteria on educators with at least two years’ experience is critical in allowing me to better understand the data provided by each of the participants experiences. Likewise, these educators will also have knowledge of both the current Social Studies curriculum. This criteria could potentially open various realms of questioning and discussions during the data collection process while providing insight into the ever evolving social studies curriculum.

Participants had experience teaching the Social Studies curriculum, which is also linked to their teaching experience. By selecting participants who have used and implemented the Social Studies curriculum will ensure that they are knowledgeable within my area of research.

Participants had also demonstrated various teaching methods for teaching Social Studies in their classrooms. This was important to me as a researcher because I wanted to ensure that the participants in this research study are invested in social studies pedagogy and have shown an interest in providing continuous learning opportunities for themselves and for their students. Educators who had different teaching methods provided me with a multitude of perspectives to examine, thus generating a wealth of data to utilize within my study.
3.3.2 Sampling Procedures/Recruitment

The purpose of this study is to better understand the dynamic relationship between the teaching and the learning of elementary school social studies. Therefore, this study looked closely at educators who specialized or who have developed an interest in the teaching of social studies. This study also used information provided by educators who are interested in seeing continued student development in their classroom with the incorporation of non-traditional teaching strategies.

According to Creswell (2013) purposeful sampling is critical to ensure to success within a case study. Specifically by focusing on a variety of different cases will provide the researcher with the ability to describe multiple perspectives.

To recruit participants I capitalized on the professional and academic communities that I am surrounded by. Using fellow educators, colleagues and other teachers that I have encountered at professional development conferences, practice teaching blocks and so on opened a vast array of potential participants for this study.

Through this form of convenience sampling and participant recruitment I was very strategic in informing participants of everything in order to prevent any potential ethical issues that may arise within the compounds of this study. For instance, I ensured that each participant is aware of their right to withdraw participation, even after consent, as well as highlighted the confidentiality measures that were be taken throughout the duration of the study to ensure participant anonymity. I also provided my contact information to my colleagues and professional
relationships rather than asking for potential participant information, therefore removing possible pressure to participate in the study.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

This section aims to provide details about each of the participants of this study including their teaching experience and relevance to this study.

Participant 1

This individual has been teaching at the elementary school level in Quebec for the last sixteen years. She has spent the entirety of this time working at the same elementary school as where she also did her practice teaching blocks during her teacher education. She specializes in junior grades with a main focus on social studies and literature. For the purposes of this study, her pseudonym will be Julie.

Participant 2

The second participant of this study is a recent graduate from a master’s program in teaching and learning and is also from Quebec. This individual has been working for the last two years as a long-term replacement in an inner city high school as a history teacher for grades 10 and 11. All references to this individual will be made under the pseudonym John.
Participant 3

The final participant for this study has had a vast array of teaching experiences. She was certified by OCT and proceeded to teach in the province of Ontario for ten years at the primary school level, following which, she moved to Quebec to teach high school English for the last 8 years. Now, this participant is working in China at an international school teaching a wide range of topics including art, drama, social studies and math. For the duration of this study, this participant will be referred to as Jolene.

3.4 Data Analysis

The complex process of data analysis took place after conducting the interviews and involved a series of steps that ultimately allowed me to better understand the data and to further develop my research and study into the use of historical fiction within the classroom setting.

Following the recorded interviews, I transcribed the data, providing me with raw, unanalyzed information. I then coded my transcripts using my research question as a tool to help me sort and contextualize the information. Following this, I created themes and categories to further sort the information which allowed me to synthesize the data and see the connections and correlations it has to each other within the greater picture of the research question.

Once the initial themes and categories were identified I aimed to make meaning of them while also trying to understand their significance by comparing this data to the research of previous studies within this field. I also looked for themes and topics that did not come up during the data collection process. This null data, as described by Marshall & Rossman (2010), also
represents important elements of data analysis and provided me with an avenue to investigate further and to combine data based on what was not said during the interviews.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Creating a strong ethical review procedure is something that I did in order to ensure participant safety and consideration. These ethical review procedures took place by evaluating and ensuring a number of elements such as confidentiality and consent, the right to withdraw, risks of participation, member checks and data storage.

Firstly, participants were asked to sign a letter of consent (Appendix A) that highlighted their ensured confidentiality, their right to withdraw from the study and provided them with an overview of the study itself. By signing this letter of consent, participants also agreed to be interviewed and audio-recorded for the purpose of this study. Moreover, in order to ensure absolute confidentiality, all participants were given a pseudonym that will be used to discuss their contribution to the study at all times. Naturally, there will no identifying markers related to the participants nor their schools or students. I reinforced to each member that participation is entirely voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

There are no known risks of participation in this study however; any unforeseen risks that may arise will be dealt with in a professional manner by assuring participants of their confidentiality and reiterating their right to withdraw. In order to minimize any risks, interview questions were be sent ahead of time to each participant in order to allow for review before proceeding with the data collection process.
Following the transcription of the recorded interviews, each participant was sent a copy of the transcribed interview before the data analysis process began. This ensured that each transcription was an accurate representation of the interview and also gave the participants a chance to clarify or retract any information.

Lastly, all data related to this study, including audio-recordings of the interviews will be stored on my password-protected laptop for five years and will then be destroyed.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The way in which I approached this study provided both strengths and limitations in regards to the overall methodology and design of this project. Given the ethical parameters of the Masters of Teaching Research Project, it could be suggested that a potential limitation of this study is the lack of multiple methods. Silverman (2005) argued that by using multiple methods to conduct a study, the researcher would obtain a variety of information across many perspectives. Furthermore, the guidelines of the Masters of Teaching Research Project limited my ability to conduct interviews and collect data from sources other than consenting adults. However, having access to students to see and hear their opinions regarding social studies in the classroom would have potentially exposed a trend or theme that otherwise may not have been discovered. Having chosen to use a case study phenomenological approach to this research project, there was potential for this study to have a limited amount of participants; therefore this small scale sample size may have had an effect on the production of relevant data.

However, single source data may also have been a strength for this study by providing consistent and strong data (Miles M.B., & Huberman A.M., 1994). Additionally, the way in
which data was collected, through semi-structured interviews, allowed the data to communicate an open ended dialogue from the participants, which allowed for further development of various topics if needed. By over planning and structuring interviews, one could argue that the researcher would then be limited and controlled. Semi-structured interviews allowed the lived experiences of each participant to be told and understood in an eloquent and detailed manner (Rubin, H.J., & Rubin, I.S., 2012)

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the methodology that was used to conduct a study that is grounded in getting a better understanding of using historical fiction within the classroom. By outlining my research procedures and design, this chapter aimed to provide an overview of what this study examined and how that will relate to the initial research question. By using a review of previous literature, semi-structured interviews and a detailed process for data analysis, this qualitative research study aims to create an avenue to better understand the way in which social studies is taught and learnt in a classroom setting. In order to successfully do this, I recruited participants that fit specific outlined criteria who were found by utilizing my community of teacher colleagues and educational professionals to locate volunteer participants for this study. I took into account key ethical considerations and methodological limitations and strengths in order to further my study both academically and professionally. The chapter that follows outlines my detailed analysis and discussion.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

This research project has aimed to understand and contextualize the use of historical fiction in elementary school social studies. Thus far, this research study has provided background information on the establishment of the research questions, framed through the background of myself as a researcher and educator. This study has also reviewed relatable articles and readings in order to establish validity of the study. In chapter 3, my research methodology was established and following that, data was collected from multiple sources including formal interviews. This chapter will now highlight pertinent themes discovered throughout the duration of this research project. By combining information from the data collection this chapter will break down each of the themes and connect them to the current historical fiction pedagogy as highlighted in chapter 2, the review of the literature.

This chapter reports and discusses a variety of themes including the notion of generating student interest in social studies through a variety of instruction strategies including emotional engagement. I also highlight the ways in which the interviews and literature connect to the notion that technology can be used to spark student interest as a relatable means of teaching in the 21st century. I will also discuss how the data reflects the importance of developing critical thinking skills at an early age and how that skill can enable students to think about the connections between past and present in a social studies context. Finally, I will report on the connection between social studies and language arts and how as teachers, we must be mindful of the ways in which we approach the use of historical fiction in a fact based setting.
4.1 Generating Student Interest through a Variety of Instructional Strategies

Thomas (2011) argues that effective teaching and learning for both students and teachers often requires dynamic and hands-on, project and inquiry based activities. A greater variety of activities will result in greater student commitment to the learning and retention of subject information.

Some teachers would express that maintaining student interest is often a challenge in any given classroom setting. A developing pattern had emerged throughout the data analysis process with regards to the issue of maintaining student engagement throughout the years. One participant, who’s pseudonym is Julie, explained this phenomenon while answering a question about her overall social studies teaching experience, she said:

My experience has changed because the students have changed. And what they know and their knowledge and what their interests are have changed… In terms of the interests, I need to do more hands on learning because they’re just not going to take in information unless they are interested in it…

As discussed by Flaim and Chiado (1994), student engagement in any subject can be done by creating a sense of familiarity within the topic. They explain that this can be done through the use of a variety of materials such as picture books, videos, dramatizations and more. Just as highlighted by Julie, maintaining student commitment has been the more challenging but also the most dynamic part of her teaching career.
4.1.1 Teachers Recognition of the need for Emotional Pedagogy

Waters (1999) mentioned in his article that by creating a diverse learning community through the use of novels in particular, students can then emotionally connect and engage with the characters in the book. Interview data from this project emulates a similar experience of how creating emotional engagement bridges the gap between traditional fact-based learning. John, a pseudonym for one of the other participants in this study, spoke about his experience teaching social studies at the high school level. He said “it’s mostly about teaching the facts and dates rather than narratives and stories. It gets a little dull for me so I can only imagine the struggle the kids go through”.

This is also further highlighted by Waters who discusses that strategically implementing relatable content into social studies actually facilitates the learning of abstract concepts. This was also mentioned by John in his discussion about what works best when trying to engage students and make them active learners. He explained that he “tries to get them emotionally engaged in the material so they can relate the information to a real world context”.

The emphasis here is on the importance of not only making material exciting and inviting for students but also relevant and applicable.
4.2 Technology in the Classroom as a Catalyst for 21st Century Learning

Technology provides an opportunity for students to become leaders within the classroom because they are held accountable for their own learning, furthermore, with the use of technology, students are encouraged to be creative and forward thinking (Flaim and Chiodo, 1994).

The use of technology in today’s classroom has become increasingly popular for a variety of reasons, particularly because of accessibility and the shift in classrooms towards more online mediums to teach such as videos, power point presentations and more. One of the participants of this study, with the pseudonym name of Jolene, even uses technology to help define her idea of what historical fiction is by explaining that “it’s either a book, short story, graphic novel or more obviously, a movie or TV series”.

Jolene also discusses her use of technology in the classroom when asked about some of the tools she uses to teach social studies. She explains “I use a lot of technology, interactive and sometimes not, sometimes just little videos.” She goes on to discuss how she wished that during her teacher training, there was more focus on including technology, instead, she had to depend on a colleague for help. She said:

She showed me how to set up the LED projector and then she gave me a list of interactive websites. I’d be lost without those. Before I asked for help, my teaching was limited to the use of over-head projectors, which I only used for note taking purposes.

Jolene’s experience with technology is not dissimilar to the experience of many beginning teachers who are trying to find the best mediums to reach their students. Thomas
(2011) mentions that by seeking out the advice or guidance of a more experienced classroom educator, new teachers are creating an open dialogue for teachers to share and cooperate in a variety of ways, which, as he highlights, is typically how historical fiction resources are shared.

4.2.1 Historical fiction and Technology: Using Media to Bridge Learning Gaps

As we can see from Jolene’s perspective, using technology to teach social studies has proven to be a challenging yet useful asset into her classroom. Another participant, John, mentioned in a response about classroom resources that he “hasn’t used fictional narratives yet. I never really considered it, because I am more of like a media guy so I like using that in my lessons”. Ease of access to a virtual world of resources has allowed technology to become a staple of modern teaching.

This interesting dynamic raises some questions about the legitimacy of historical fiction to also include movies, television shows and other video clips. Pantaleo (2002) briefly discusses the growth of children’s historical fiction but goes on to elaborate the continued dominance of middle and high school leveled novels and or movies that are not always suitable for younger, less experienced audiences such as the K-6 age range.

Although the literature suggests that historical fiction should be integrated into the classroom, few authors explicitly describe what historical fiction actually looks like to the everyday teacher. As such, both John and Jolene highlight the subjectivity of this topic and how each educator is within their own parameters to make meaning of the term in whichever way they feel best reflects their own teaching philosophies.
4.3 Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Elementary Schools

The current Ontario social studies curriculum focuses on developmental concepts around promoting critical thinking skills in our classrooms. Developing critical thought suggests that students will have the ability to ask questions about a variety of topics in order to further their understanding as well as to contextualize the subject matter. Promoting critical thinking is also giving students the means to ask questions. Julie, a participant in this study, highlights how she found that by reading books about the holocaust, she is always surprised by the amount of questions that her students have about it. She says:

I always feel like we learn from history, especially the history that is not positive, we need to have a better understanding that history can and does repeat itself. Like every time we do the holocaust the class are always like “but why are people doing this to each other?” or “Why is this even happening?

Formulating these questions, according to Rysick and Rosler (2009) is the way in which students are learning from the experiences of others while also aiming to make meaning of abstract concepts that are often foreign to them.

4.3.1 Connections between Past and Present: Asking Questions to Deepen Knowledge and Understanding

In my interview with John, an interesting conversation arose around prepping students in elementary school with critical thinking skills so that when they enter high school, they are able to be knowledgeable and active citizens. He talked about how in his high school history class he
“likes to give them all the information he can about a single topic from a variety of sources and perspectives so that they can see it all as a whole and take from it what they want”. Julie also referenced this idea of creating informed citizens through her use of a historical fiction novel titled Daniel’s Story by Carol Matas. Julie admits:

My main one is Daniel’s Story because it involves a character that the kids can relate to. It gives them something to grasp other than the facts, so that means there is relevance. They’re hearing the story as though it happened to this one person and they are identifying with it in that way. It gives them that connection that they need because people don’t always take the time to think about how something affects them. This novel opens that door to questions, feelings and thoughts that they might not get otherwise.

This idea of choice in learning is something that Sandmann (2004) highlights in his discussions about how students make meaning from the information we give them. He explains that through proper instruction around critical thought and historical fiction in novels, students can easily make connections between the characters in the story to their own personal lives. This ability, further highlighted by Youngs (2012) is something that can be applied in a multitude of subject areas as well as in personal relationships as it builds on student’s capacity to empathize with one another.
4.4 Cross-Curricular Elements of Social Studies

Historical fiction provides a creative avenue for teachers as it allows teachers to offer context as well as fact-based understanding for learners using non-traditional avenues. For students, historical fictions should aim to generate relatability to characters in the story. Generating cross-curricular lesson plans is a common medium for educators as it allows single lessons or units to cover a multitude of subjects. Jolene posited in her interview that “you can find history in like in language arts, math, science, art and music. If you can find history there, you can find fiction there too”. The concept of integrating social studies into other subjects was also acknowledged by Julie as she reiterated this concept by stating “I’m going to use the holocaust as a language arts topic but also branch it into ethics and art. It’s such an open ended avenue that I can get really creative with it”. By using literature to teach social studies, Gibson and Tranter (1998) argue that in giving students the tools necessary to simultaneously learn two subjects at once, teachers are in fact covering more material in a more applicable and real life way than traditional single subject teachings.

4.4.1 Unpacking Historical Fiction Concepts within Traditional Fiction

John, a participant who teaches at the high school level discussed the importance of setting the stage for students at a young age to be able to understand the fundamental difference between fiction and history. He explains that “students who can’t separate themselves from the fiction when they get older are faced with some problems because they’ve learnt everything through a fictional lens”.
In order to be effective in our teachings of historical fiction, Jolene describes how teaching historical fiction asks that you “focus more on the history and being critical part. Sometimes with traditional books and fiction, you can just sit back and enjoy the story but with history, you need to dissect it a bit more”

This idea of dissecting a historical fiction book is highlighted by Tarc (2011) who explains that for students to really grasp the bigger picture within historical fiction, we need to give them to tools to do that before we even start the book. In fact, Tarc suggests teaching history through a fact-based approach first and then only integrating historical fiction once the knowledge base is present. This strategy was also discussed by one of the participants, Julie. She explained her notion of the difference between traditional fiction and historical fiction by saying

“In the teaching of historical fiction, in doing that, there is an element of teaching the actual history that you have to have before you introduce the novel. In historical fiction you have to have a discussion about the actual events otherwise you will lose the element of context. For my holocaust unit, there is almost more pre-work with it before I can even jump into the novel I use. Pre-amble is important.”

As mentioned by Julie, aiming to create a cross-curricular lesson or unit require ample amounts of pre-planning. Dunn (2000) also emphasises on an educator’s ability to objectively look at two subjects and see how then can benefit but also potentially hinder the instruction or learning of the material. Awareness of the pros and cons of using cross-curricular teaching is
hinted in the above quote by Julie. Her explanation about providing facts before fiction is crucial in the development of greater understanding and context within the subject.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed key findings in the data that were collected in connection to the notion of using historical fiction as an instructional tool in the social studies. These findings highlighted the importance of using appropriate instructional strategies outside to engage and motivate students on an emotional level, how the use of technology and its classroom implications as highlighted by current research can provide students with opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills and lastly the discussion of using a multi-subject teaching method can be seen as beneficial for both students and teachers.

Generating student interest through a assortment of teaching techniques has been discussed in the literature as a means to maintain student engagement. Some suggestions, provided by Nawrot (1996) highlight using audio and visual material as a means to engage students. Furthermore, Waters (1999) also suggests that by creating relatable material, students will become intrinsically motivated to continue learning. These articles emulate similar discussions around what each participant spoke to as well. Although challenging, each participant recognized the importance of maintaining classroom attentiveness and engagement.

The second prominent theme to emerge in this study was the incorporation of technology into the classroom to aid in the teaching of social studies. Many of the participants discussed the vital role technology has played in there teachings be it through short videos, audio clips, websites, photos and more. This 21st century classroom enhancement was mentioned briefly in
an article by Flaim and Chiodo (1994) who recognized the changing dynamic of classrooms in the early 1990s. However, most research that theorizes on the use of historical fiction does so by placing value on the use of short stories or novels at the elementary school level.

The notion of developing critical thinking skills in elementary school settings developed in a number of prominent research around historical fiction. More so in an article by Bilof (1996) who discussed the importance of being critical of historical fiction books by giving students the tools separate fact from fiction. Each of the participants in this study were also aware of how reading fictional texts can motivate students to ask questions about things that might not have come up in an otherwise traditional classroom setting.

A final emergent theme developed out of the idea of creating cross-curricular lessons and units in social studies. One participant in particular, Julie, was talking about how she would use a unit on the Holocaust to bridge over into art as well as ethics. She elaborated on her freedom with a cross-curricular pedagogy to get creative with her lessons. Gibson and Tranter (1998) support Julies theory by elaborating that by teaching multiple subjects at once, educators are giving students the tools they need to be objective and understanding of their surroundings.

Historical fiction is not without its limitations, as mentioned by Tarc (2011) who cautioned teachers from relying too heavily on fiction based stories to lead what is essentially a fact based subject.

The following chapter will discuss the implications of each of these finding and how they relate to the overall idea of using historical fiction to aid in the teaching of social studies. I will discuss how these findings relate to the community of education as well as how these findings are related to my own growth and development as a teacher and a researcher. The subsequent
chapter will also provide recommendations for fellow teachers, researchers and curriculum developers and will also discuss any potential areas for further development and future research.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction

Thus far, this research study has discussed the concept of integrating historical fiction novels in an elementary school setting as a means to revamp the traditional teaching of social studies. Each chapter has focused on highlighting different elements of this project including a detailed review of the literature, a methodological framework and data collection and analysis. This final chapter will focus on the implications of the significant findings emphasized in chapter four. The following themes were discussed in chapter four and will be further developed in this chapter:

1. Generating student interest through a variety of instructional strategies
2. Using technology as a catalyst for 21st century learning
3. The importance and significance of developing critical thinking skills in elementary schools
4. Highlighting the implications of a cross curricular pedagogy in social studies

More specifically, I will focus on how these findings implicate the educational community as a whole as well as the implications of these findings for me as a teacher and a researcher. In this chapter I will also provide recommendations, based on what I have learned throughout the duration of this project, to current teachers, school boards and pre-service teachers in their teacher education programs. Additionally, I will highlight certain areas that cause for further research and where educational researcher scholars should focus their attention and why. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with a summary of what I discovered during this research project and the significance of these findings for members of the educational community.
5.1 Overview of Key Findings

Chapter four was dedicated to the presentation of the research findings that were discovered during the data analysis portion of this project. During this phase of data analysis, four significant research findings were discovered.

The first important theme spoke to the idea of generating student interest through a variety of instructional strategies. This theme incorporated teachers’ recognition of the need for emotional pedagogy embedded within their classroom. The data and literature highlights that this emotional engagement with the material is most often achieved when students can personally relate to a topic or subject (Nawrot, 1996). In most cases, according to Sandmann (2004), this is typically achieved when students find and interrogate commonalities with characters in a novel.

The second emergent theme was that of using technology in the classroom as a catalyst for 21st century learning. Each participant in this study recognized the use of movies and media as a means of merging social studies and technology. As discussed by Swan, Hofer and Locascio (2007), using non-traditional methods of instruction in the social studies allowed students to contextualize the material, therefore bridging any potential learning gaps through culturally relevant and relatable pedagogy. Participants also spoke to the ways in which most students seem more adept with technology, subsequently allowing teachers to be more creative with their lessons.

A third critical theme that was discovered was the concept that teachers should be aiming to develop critical thinking skills in elementary schools. By making important connections between past and present, students are forming important socioemotional skills such as empathy and problem solving (Tarc, 2011). As discussed in chapter four, the ability to think critically is
developed through the need to ask questions, something that social studies instruction using historical fiction roots itself in.

A final emergent theme looked at the importance of creating a cross-curricular pedagogy in the social studies. Thomas (2011) argued that history is often a subject that is under-valued in classrooms by both teachers and students. Participants in this study also discussed their experiences in using a cross-curricular approach to social studies and language arts as being a time effective, interactive and an engaging way to cover a multitude of topics.

5.2 Implications

This section will discuss both the broad and narrow implications of this research project. The broad implications will focus on how these findings connect to the educational community as a whole while the narrow implications will examine how these findings relate to me as a teacher as well as a researcher.

5.2.1 Broad Implications

According to the literature and data, it seems that there is reason enough to seek change in the way that educators approach teaching social studies. The notion of teaching solely from the use of a textbook is, as discussed in the research, an outdated method of social studies instruction. This implication highlights how the educational community is continually evolving and learning about more about effective ways to teach and engage students. This research highlights the pedagogy behind the correlation of student success and elementary school social studies.
5.2.2 Narrow Implications

This project has had a multitude of effects on me as a teacher. Throughout the duration of this study, I have felt affirmation in my educational philosophy of believing that in order to be an effective teacher; we must always be willing to try new methods that cater to the needs of each student.

This project has also confirmed my beliefs in inquiry based learning approaches. Creating an environment where students feel empowered at school and are able to take control of their own learning has been a continuous element of my discussion and analysis of this project. Reading the literature and talking to each of the participants has solidified that notion for me, and as such, I will bring part of that inquiry-based philosophy into my own classroom. Combined with this, is the belief that as educators, we have a role to play in social justice pedagogy. My research is aimed at altering the traditional methods in which we approach social studies, which, according to Flaim and Chiodo (1994), is often Eurocentric. Going forward, this project has prompted me to ask more questions with regards to curriculum, as well as to be more mindful and strategic in my choice of novels, lesson plan activities and discussion questions.

5.3 Recommendations

In this section, I will discuss and provide recommendations based on what I have learned, to a variety of individuals and organizations within the educational community. These recommendations are based on the research findings, literature review and learned practices that I have experienced throughout the duration of this project. The recommendations I have highlighted are:
HUMANIZING AND CONTEXTUALIZING THE SOCIAL STUDIES: HISTORICAL FICTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

- For current teachers to integrate a cross-curricular instructional approach to social studies
- For school boards to create initiatives that are catered toward the development of resources at the elementary school level

According to research by Dunn (2000), teachers who are looking to expand their lessons and try new and innovative ways to incorporate things such as inquiry based lesson plans, are often hesitant to do so due to a lack of support as well as knowledge of resources. In the case of using historical fiction to teach elementary school social studies, it would be my recommendation to current teachers to reach out to one another to share resources and to brainstorm ideas. Dunn also explains that the use of collaboration amongst teachers in the elementary school system creates a better learning environment for the students and also creates a sense of community amongst the staff. I would further suggest to teachers who still feel uncomfortable with trying new methods of teaching, to participate in professional development workshops. These workshops, often led by fellow teachers, can be a great way to learn new strategies as well as to network within a larger group of educators.

During the course of this study, particularly with regards to the literature review of chapter two, I have remarked on the apparent lack of available texts, books, novels and other forms of historical fiction specific for an elementary school population. Based on this insight gleaned from both the literature and from the data collected from participants, it would be my recommendation for institutions such as school boards to aim to recognize the lack of social studies resources readily available for elementary school teachers. I would recommend that school boards develop initiatives for teachers in the form of workshops, conferences, sponsored
programming and more in order to support the growth and development of these appropriate resources. Furthermore, the literature has also suggested a lack of historical fiction from a Canadian context, which can be problematic for Canadian teachers looking to bring historical fiction into the classroom.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Over the course of this research project, I have examined past literature that speaks to the shifts in education from teacher directed learning to student centered learning. I have also interviewed and analyzed data from current teachers who can speak to the benefits and challenges of using historical fiction in their classrooms. In this section, I will look at the areas in which future educational scholars should focus their attention and why.

The first question I came across over the course of this study was; why is there so little awareness of historical fiction at the elementary school level? Upon embarking on this study, the search for participants was daunting at first because there seemed to be a very small pool of educators who were familiar with the term historical fiction and what that means to apply it within the classroom. Future research areas should examine as to why teachers are unaware of what historical fiction is, and perhaps, what they are doing in their classrooms instead? Each participant of this study discussed their unwillingness to utilize a textbook based approach to their lessons meaning that they are implementing other means of teaching.

A second question that kept reoccurring was with regards to where do we, as teachers and researchers, initiate a change in the way social studies is being taught? Fuhler (1991) suggests that there is a need to change the way in which educators approach social studies in order to help
students retain more information. Fuhler uses emotional engagement within novel studies to increase student engagement and therefore retention of information. However, if we want this method of teaching to become normalized in everyday classrooms, should this change begin at the school level via school to school policies, or at the ministry in the form of shift in curriculum development? It is important to note the need for change as well as the research into where it must begin in order to be effective.

A final question that arose was that, if we want teachers to incorporate more literature and novel studies in their social studies classroom, where should this concept be introduced? Should we incorporate these cross-curricular designs in teacher education? Or should the emphasis come afterwards, in the first few years of teaching? Should a tactic such as incorporating literacy and the social studies be continuously implied? Or should professional development workshops be used to enable teachers with the skills and resources to make these changed to their social studies lessons and units? Combined together, these questions form the notion that as researchers, we need to understand where and when to introduce a new teaching methodology to teachers that would prove to be most effective and have the greatest influence on bringing change into the classroom.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The connection between literacy instruction and that of the social studies is prevalent and has been highlighted throughout the durations of this study. Both with research and through data collection, we know that there is a link between an increase in student engagement and success and non-traditional teaching methods. The data also shows that the relations between student
centered learning, inquiry based classrooms and teacher involvement are also factors that contribute to creating a positive and rich learning environment.

This research has implications on teachers and students alike. The notion of creating cross curricular lessons allows teachers to better maximize their time in the classroom. Furthermore, being part of a classroom community that is centered on asking questions, developing inference skills and critical thinking, can be beneficial for students both personally and academically.

This research speaks to the need to emotionally engage and entice students in the curriculum but also to the need for creativity and diversity among lessons created by teachers. This project brings to light the importance of using alternative methods of teaching for the benefit of both the student and the teacher. Furthermore, this project asks the question, are we doing everything we can to make learning social studies engaging and fun as well as informative and fact based? This project seeks to highlight the changing landscape of social studies and literacy education by looking at the past, present and future steps for elementary school teachers.
HUMANIZING AND CONTEXTUALIZING THE SOCIAL STUDIES: HISTORICAL FICTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

References


HUMANIZING AND CONTEXTUALIZING THE SOCIAL STUDIES: HISTORICAL FICTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.


Appendix A: Letter of Consent

Date: ________________

Dear ____________________,

My name is Kelsey Kearns. I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the use and incorporation of historical fiction within elementary school classrooms for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide 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 is providing support for the process this year is Ken McNeilly. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 35 to 40 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, 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 might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Kelsey Kearns
HUMANIZING AND CONTEXTUALIZING THE SOCIAL STUDIES: HISTORICAL FICTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Phone number (514)713-3962
Email: kelsey.kearns@mail.utoronto.ca

Instructor’s Name: Ken McNeilly
Email: ken.mcneilly@utoronto.ca

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 Kelsey Kearns and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: _____________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this interview. The aim of this research is to learn about the use of historical fiction in elementary school classrooms. The interview should take approximately 35-40 minutes. I will ask you a series of 18 questions focused on your own experiences inside and outside the classroom. I want to remind you of your right to choose not to answer any question. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. In what contexts have you taught?
3. Describe your overall experience teaching social studies since the beginning of your teaching career.
4. Would you say your experience in teaching social studies has been mostly positive?
5. What are some of the things you have done to change or improve your general teaching methods over the years?
6. What do you think works best when trying to engage students and make them active learners in your class?
7. In your experience what role does history/social studies play for children in elementary school?
8. Do you think that there is more than one way to approach teaching social studies?
9. How would you define historical fiction?
10. Do you think historical fiction enhances students’ personal connections to the subject matter?
11. What cross-curricular connections, if any, do you think historical fiction might generate?
12. How do you think the instruction of historical fiction differs from that of traditional fiction?
13. What is the instructional approach most commonly used by you to teach the current social studies curriculum in elementary schools?
14. Do you use a social studies textbook in your classroom? How often and in what ways do you utilize this tool? If not, why would you say you do not use it?
15. Do you use any alternative tools to teach social studies? What are they? How did you come across them?
16. Have you encountered any barriers or restrictions in the teaching of social studies?
17. What are some strategies you would use to prepare or train future teachers on how to engage students in the learning of social studies? Do you think that your own teacher training was helpful to you in this sense?
18. Lastly, are there any questions you would like to ask me?