Engagement, Disengagement, and Challenges in High School History Classrooms

By

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Abstract

Polls and controversial figures like Jack Granatstein suggest that Canadians lack knowledge in Canadian History. Inspired by these claims, this study aims to examine strategies that Ontario History teachers use to engage grade 10 Applied Canadian History students. It further delves into the strategies, resources, and challenges teachers experience when seeking to engage their students in History. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers experienced in teaching grade 10 Applied Canadian History in Ontario, and literature was reviewed focusing on engagement in History. Findings suggest that Ontario Applied History teachers need to utilize primary sources, artefacts, and have students experience History for the best perceived outcomes. Further to this, teachers report encountering challenges such as the time to culminate primary sources, lack of support for the Applied stream, and encountering students with low motivation.

Key Words: student engagement, History, secondary school, Ontario
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

Canadian History is a mandatory course for Ontario students in grade 10. While it is a compulsory course, many Canadians believe that they lack knowledge in Canadian History. Ipsos-Reid (2001) conducted a poll on adult Canadians on their historical knowledge and found that 76% of Canadians were ashamed at their knowledge of Canadian History, and 81% of Canadians reported that they agree to the item stating “would support a strong role for the federal government in setting national standards for teaching history.” This poll seems to reflect the discussion regarding the state of Canadian History by prominent figures such as Jack Granatstein (1998), a controversial figure who believes Canadian History to be boring, politically charged, and that students are simply not getting it. He argues that Canadian History is befuddled by bureaucratic decisions, where some provinces do not even have History as a mandatory course, or that the lack of a nationalized standard in History produces too many variations. He further argues that Canadian History is heavily devoted to British History, where Canadian History is watered down in significance. Chris Lorenz (1999) claims that while Granatstein makes many assumptions on Canadian History, there is some truth to Granatstein’s criticisms on the need for a Canadian national identity. Granatstein (1998) argues that Canada’s “multicultural mania” (p. 72) creates fragmented histories and identities, citing the example of Quebec separatism as a disaster towards a unified Canadian identity. Lorenz (1999) firmly supports the need for a unified history or identity by stating that most Canadians have forgotten “D-Day, Flanders Fields, and Vimy Ridge,” while countries like the Netherlands still recognize Canada’s efforts in the liberation of Holland. Brian McKillop (1999) also agreed to a certain extent with Granatstein’s polemic discourse on the state of Canadian History. He supported the claim that students are not
taught enough History and feels as if Canadian History is becoming increasingly insignificant to public memory. Even though both McKillop and Granatstein believe that Canadian History is becoming meaningless, there have been changes put in place to improve the situation since the late 1990s.

It is important to understand that Canadian History serves multiple purposes. While it can be used as a tool for a sense of citizenship or nation building, it can also serve as “press for greater attention to the wider multicultural diversity of Canadian society” (Osborne 2011, p. 64). Martha Nussbaum even goes as far as arguing that “history… might be essential” and without the humanities, democracy itself is at risk (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. ix).

In 2009, Historica Canada assessed the Canadian History curriculum from all provinces and territories in determining a variety of themes they deemed were crucial to the national identity. They gave failing reports to five provinces and territories for their weak historical curriculum and student understanding of Canada’s history (Brown, 2016). In the 21st Century Competencies (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2016, p. 54), the Ontario Ministry of Education strives to create citizens that are actively engaged learners that are motivated to learn, and engage in “deeper learning” through the curriculum. However, Clark (2009), a researcher interested in the experiences in high school History classes, conducted interviews with high school students and educators interested in History education were asked “how they identify with their nation’s past and how they think the subject should be taught” (p. 755). The study explores the idea that students may be disengaged from History if the classroom is not challenging, engaging, and has a focus on the “recitation of the nation’s story” (Clark, 2009, p. 759). There is also research to suggest that engagement is integral to the History classroom (Clark, 2009; Harris & Haydn, 2008; Symcox, 2004). As such, it is important to define what it means to be “engaged”.

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Thus, I use Appleton, Christenson & Furlong’s (2008) definition of engagement for the purposes of my research: as a condition or state in which an individual is interested or entangled in an activity or act. Most researchers disagree with an absolute definition of engagement, but all contain elements of behaviourism, and accept its multidimensionality.

1.1 Research Problem

Despite the Ontario Ministry of Education’s stance on engagement and learners, research suggests that some high school History classrooms still hold an emphasis on memorization and content-heavy prioritization (Clark, 2009). Some History educators find that the majority of their students did not enjoy History in high school (Bennett, 2016; Fielding, 2005). They believe only teachers that place effort in engaging their students through storytelling and fieldtrips, produced effective and engaging experiences. Fielding further describes an effective or engaging experience as one that students can develop critical thinking and decision-making skills.

Furthermore, many Canadian adults polled reported feeling embarrassment in their lack of historical knowledge (Ipsos-Reid, 2001). The reported lack of historical knowledge in Canadians in combination with the expressed disengaging teaching methods in History classrooms suggests that there is a greater need to emphasize student engagement in classrooms. Osborne (2006) conveys that disengaging teaching methods, such as those represented in the 1960-1970s, had students as “desk-bound listeners” where “they sat, listened, and memorized.” As such, interviewing teachers who work to foster engagement in students may help understand the teachers’ challenges in engaging students, their interpretation of student engagement, and whether their experiences reflect the research on engagement.
1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine Ontario grade 10 History teachers’ strategies for fostering student engagement. I interviewed two of these teachers about the Ontario History curriculum, their pedagogies, and any tools utilized to engage students. I share these findings with the educational research community to further inform instructional support for student engagement in History.

1.3 Research Questions

The central research question guiding my study is: how are Ontario grade 10 History teachers working to foster student engagement? The sub-questions further guiding this study are as follows:

1) What does “student engagement” mean to teachers?

2) What kind of indicators of engagement do teachers perceive in class?

3) What kind of challenges do teachers face when trying to engage students? How do they confront them?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

As a person who grew up in Canada and experienced the Ontario educational system first hand; I have had many encounters with students who have had excellent and poor experiences with their high school History teachers. I attended Francis Libermann C.H.S., a publicly funded Ontario Catholic school. The school had a diverse community of students with various backgrounds, cultures, and with students coming from a mostly lower socioeconomic background. There was some poor reputation associated with the school about it being dangerous,
but it was not necessarily the case from my experience. Fortunately, I was also able to have an amazing History teacher who jump-started my passion and love for History. Her belief in History is that students should not just be studying History for a grade, but should see that History is a way of thinking and observing the world. She wanted her students to live and breathe History, especially by assigning us work that involved personal History, such as a memory box.

The memory box assignment was an incredibly memorable and life changing for me. This sole assignment allowed me to foster and develop a love for History. It entailed collecting a checklist of items such as something personal, something that has the date on it, a newspaper article, letters from classmates, a letter and journal to oneself, and other seemingly insignificant items at the time. During my second year in my undergraduate program, I found the memory box in my room closet and discovered a part of myself that I still cherish today. I learned parts of my life at the time I forgotten, news and important events to me, and most of all: the idea that History is all encompassing. My journals and letters were now primary sources from 2008.

Since then, I have come across students with all sorts of experiences in History classes. Some had positive experiences in History class; others did not enjoy History class at all. There were also those who did not enjoy high school History but still had a fantastic experience in the classroom. The students who did enjoy History generally said that their teacher was fun to talk to, extremely knowledgeable, and could make things relevant to them. Furthermore, the most surprising commonality between “good” teachers I hear is about their sense of humour and their humanness. To clarify on humanness, it is their ability to be “down-to-earth,” flexible, able to admit to mistakes, and to be relatable. Some bad experiences I have heard were the teachers being boring, dry, textbook heavy with an extreme focus on the minute details such as dates. Many of these students found the material irrelevant, or did not understand the significance to
why they should know the material besides getting a good grade. They found History to be too heavy on memorization.

Overall, I believe it is important to recognize that being taught in a system that promoted historical learning and understanding may have influenced me to believe that the curriculum is not the issue. Furthermore, I may also hold a bias to certain teaching methods that were effectively used on me in high school, rather than seeing whether it is effective to current students. Furthermore, I want to recognize that because I have heard a lot more negative feedback on students’ high school History experiences that it may also make me think that there many more students experience negative engagement in Ontario high schools than in actuality. Moreover, the experiences that I had heard from peers, educators, and personal experiences may make me believe that there are problems where problems do not exist. Lastly, during my first practicum experience while at OISE’s Master of Teaching program, my biggest challenge was to engage the students in History. The class was primarily a mix of Academic and Applied students, with some students identified by the associate teacher as, ‘at a Grade 3 reading and comprehension level.’ Through my MTRP, I want to gain a greater understanding in engagement and how to produce effective strategies in tackling History classrooms with the challenge of engaging students. I also want to understand tools, aspects, and theories to what may be causing disengagement to students.

1.5 Overview of the MTRP

To respond to the research questions, I conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview two teachers about their strategies for engaging high school History students. In Chapter 2 I review the literature in the areas of engagement, and tools used
to engage student learning. Next, in Chapter 3 I elaborate on the research design. In Chapter 4 I report my research findings and discuss their significance considering the existing research literature, and in Chapter 5 I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The literature review looks at definitions of engagement, findings on engagement and its role in learning, and the challenges faced by teachers when engaging students. To start, engagement can be separated into three distinct categories and is gauged by different means. It is split into cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement with no widely-accepted definition by researchers except for it being multidimensional (Li & Lerner, 2013; Yonezawa, Jones, & Joselowsky, 2009). Next, I look at tools used by teachers such as textbooks and technological integration, and assess their impact towards student learning in the classroom. Specifically related to textbooks, most articles argue that textbooks are not the most effective means of student engagement, with some exceptions in claims that some text integration through group collaboration can improve student engagement (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan & Worthy, 1996). In terms of technological integration, Ontario teachers are reportedly feeling inadequately trained in utilizing technology in the classroom to its fullest potential. Not only that but many Ontario teachers surveyed believe there is a lack of funding, technology available in the classroom is obsolete, and the technology available cannot be fully utilized due to the poor technological infrastructure in the school (ORION, 2015). For example, one teacher reported that computers were so slow that they were “unable to run more than one application on a machine,” and one teacher had to bring their own storage devices to allow students to view higher quality media content (ORION, 2015, pp. 5-6). Finally, I look at theories and components in effective teaching as a means to understand the requirements in effective student engagement.
2.1 Engagement

Engagement is the act of “turning on” the brain to a material or subject. Astin (1999) suggests that the level of engagement in a student determines the amount of “physical and psychological energy ... [that a student] ... devotes to the academic experience” (518). Furthermore, it is suggested that a high level of engagement can improve the quality of the learning experience and enable deeper learning to occur (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Parrish, 2009). There are three different kinds of engagement: cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement (Li & Lerner, 2013). Per recent research in the field of engagement, some researchers find that it is necessary to interpret engagement in a multidimensional way: to employ the three areas of engagement simultaneously (Yonezawa, Jones, & Joselowsky, 2009). To clarify “multidimensional way,” it is the understanding that engagement does not have a sole pattern or formula. Activities, actions, or academic materials affect each student differently depending on anything from learning styles to interests. Some researchers evaluate student engagement to be how connected or interested they are in a course, institution, or in their peers (Axelson & Flick, 2011). They explore the desirable nature or elements that come through human interaction (Axelson & Flick, 2011), rather than through Astin’s (1999) definition that weighed physical and psychological characteristics in engagement equally. However that may be, Astin indicates that there are “no essential differences” in the varying definitions of engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2011, p. 40). Despite the inconsistencies among scholars on a clear definition, there are commonalities among all the researchers (Yonezawa, Jones, & Joselowsky, 2009; Astin, 1999; Axelson & Flick, 2011; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Parrish, 2009; Appleton et al., 2008). It is believed that engagement needs to be recognized in a multidimensional way and that it has behavioural components (Appleton et al., 2008).
2.1.1 Engagement in the History classroom

Engagement is widely seen to be crucial to teaching History (Lazare, 2005; Clark, 2009; Harris & Haydn, 2008; Symcox, 2004). There is a strong correlation found on some Ontario high school History students between being emotionally engaged to material and having good memory recall (Lazare, 2005). Students that emotionally bond with material (i.e., textbooks) given tend to perform better academically and recall narratives within stories with greater ease. However, students expressing little to no interest in History were still able to achieve high academic success. Some students would cater to their teachers’ expectations, rather than learning the material or displaying genuine interest. Lazare’s (2005) study found that history students often reported “getting marks” to be their greatest motivator, and said that “participants willingly checked their emotions at the door of the history classroom... emotional engagement with history is primarily an extra-curricular activity” (52). The term emotional engagement focuses on “interest, identification, belonging, and positive attitude about learning” (Duros, 2015, p. 8; Finn, 1989; Marks, 2000; Newmann, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992; Appleton et. al, 2008; Willms, 2003). There is evidence supporting that a positive emotional climate promotes positive participation, interactions, and improves student confidence overall and students with strong emotional bonds with their teachers tend to be more engaged overall (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta & Hamre, 2001; Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012).

2.2 Challenges in Engaging History Students

Students often perceive History to be authoritative, where facts are not evaluated in depth, and fail to recognize the complexity of issues and events (Newmann, 1991; VanSickle & Hoge, 1991; Wineburg, 1999). Teachers often find difficulty engaging students to learning historical knowledge because it requires building from prior knowledge and students need to “genuinely
engage the problem” for “critical reasoning” to occur (Brush & Saye, 2006a, p. 4; Newmann, 1991). Furthermore, Lazare’s (2005) study illustrated obtaining high marks to be a motivating factor for History students, rather than genuine engagement with the material. There is also some discussion about the learning environment in Historical classrooms being a barrier to student engagement (Saye & Brush, 1999; Saye & Brush, 2002; Brush & Saye, 2006b). For example, an environment that promotes Historical learning through multimedia can generate genuine interest in student learning (Saye & Brush, 1999; Saye & Brush, 2002; Brush & Saye, 2006b). One student stated that, they “got to see actual footage of things” and “see people’s opinion on it and how everyone had a different… perspective… that makes history fun.” (Saye & Brush, 2008, pp. 16-17). In a survey asking high school History students whether History was “quite enjoyable” or “not enjoyable” reported that over 70% of students found History to be interesting as a subject, but most participants also found little purpose in studying History (Haydn & Harris, 2006, p. 20).

Another challenge in engaging students is the method teachers use to deliver the content and subject to students (Biddulph & Adey, 2002). Students often enjoy learning when they can interact with the material (Cooper & McIntyre, 1994). This can pose as a problem as some students dislike tasks that are recommended to be taught in an Ontario History class, such as writing essays (Freyhofer, 2000; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

2.2.1 Textbooks and History student engagement

Typically, textbooks are written by multiple authors of differing areas of expertise in their field of study. One common problem that students have with textbooks is that textbooks are too often seen as a source of fact and truth; they are often thought to be fundamentally correct and free of error (Paxton, 1999). One proposed reason to why History textbooks are often seen as absolute truth is the lack of hedging. Without the use of hedging in textbooks, authors are
perceived to be authoritative in tone and nature (Aguilar, 2008). Textbooks generally give little interpretation of the facts and give students the impression that the textbook is never wrong. Lessons designed around textbooks are one common method used to teach high school History classrooms (Granatstein, 1998). However, it is suggested that they are not sufficient in developing critical understanding of Historical knowledge, and can be disengaging for students (McKeown & Beck, 1994; Ravitch, 1989; Granatstein, 1998). This can attribute to the lack of cognitive engagement required in textbooks and the need to be emotionally invested in the narrative to be actively engaged with text (Lazare, 2005). One survey conducted by Harris and Haydn (2006) with high school History students revealed that students expressed displeasure when teachers were heavily reliant on the use of textbooks and worksheets. Out of 394 responses, about 15% of students reported using textbooks and worksheets as one of their least popular activities with girls being more likely to dislike working with textbooks. However, there is also evidence to suggest that new History textbooks can be more engaging for students when written through multiple narratives, and provides different points of view on events (Lazare, 2005; Letoumeau, 2002; McKeown & Beck, 1994; Levstik, 1995).

There is very little research done post-2000s that promotes the usage of textbooks as a means of engaging students, particularly history students. One study, using observation, video recording on teachers teaching lessons, and student written responses on comprehension questions found that texts and textbooks can be engaging if students are challenged to de-authoritize the text as a group activity (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan & Worthy, 1996). However, research has indicated that using text or textbooks as a learning tool is an ineffective strategy of engaging students. Evidence suggests that textbooks can work as a supplement to an activity as a means of engagement as long it is not the sole means of knowledge acquisition.
2.3 Technology and Historical Engagement

Being in line with Ontario’s desire for 21st Century Competencies, there is a requirement for schools to integrate technology into student learning to develop the technological familiarities and skills necessary for future careers (Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2011). Since the early 2000s, schools have been trying to include modern technological integration into teaching and learning. For example, York Mills Collegiate, a school in Toronto, Ontario, has been running a Twitter feed called ‘Technology Today,’ introducing interactive white boards, wireless technologies, and computer language software in the school (MaRS, 2011). According to a study done in 2014, 99% of Ontario public school students have access to a computer, most of which are located in classrooms, libraries, labs, or with their own devices (Chen, Gallagher-Mackay, & Kidder, 2014). Peel District School Board even has a bring your own device (BYOD) policy that allows students to bring everything from their phones to personal computers to class to supplement their learning (Chen, Gallagher-Mackay, & Kidder, 2014). Technology can be used as a scaffolding tool to generate genuine interest in students (Brush & Saye, 2006b). One method of technological integration in the Historical classroom is using hyperlinks in essays to generate student interest. It would deliberately include hyperlinks to primary and secondary sources for students to click and further explore to gain a better understanding of the topic (Brush & Saye, 2006b).

2.5 Conclusion

This literature review looked at research on engagement, challenges in engaging History students, and some important tools teachers use to interact and keep student interest. There is evidence to suggest that it is not easy to keep the interest of high school History students, with
such issues like grade-motivated learning, students feeling that History has no purpose, delivering interesting Historical content, and the potential problems with textbooks and technology. There is research available that both supports and rejects the usage of textbooks in the History classroom, and comes to the consensus that texts with narrative in multiple viewpoints and voices appear to engage students. In general, it appears that students are more interested in History when approaching content through a hands-on basis. With the Ontario Ministry of Education requiring technological integration to teach students, it appears to provide new avenues for hands-on tools, such as interactive white boards. Furthermore, Lazare’s (2005) study suggests that newer textbooks can engage students in comparison to older textbooks, although it is unclear to what extent it is engaging. Touching upon these areas are an integral part of understanding possible strategies to fostering student engagement, as it helps show the potential holes in the Ontario education system and areas that History teachers should avoid or promote in their classroom.

This review raises questions as to what other widely used educational tools are effective for increasing student engagement. It points to the need to further research to understand what teaching strategies will engage students and disengage students. Considering this, the purpose of my research was to learn more about strategies in fostering engagement in Grade 10 high school History students, so that educators will not only better understand how to develop, plan, and prepare their lessons, but to inspire more students to pursue studies in History.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The aim of this proposed study was to explore different strategies that Ontario high school teachers use to foster engagement in History students. To achieve that, a qualitative research design was adopted. In this chapter I explain the methodological decisions and the rationale behind them to conduct this study. I start with the research approach and procedure and then elaborate on the instruments used for data collection. Next, I identify the participants of the study, discuss the sampling criteria, provide the sampling procedures, and include information about the participants. In addition, I explain how I analyze the data, review the ethical procedures, and observe the limitations of this methodology.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

In this qualitative research study, I interviewed two Ontario high school History teachers and summarized the different strategies they utilize to encourage engagement in History students. Qualitative interviews are arguably an important method of obtaining data from other individuals or groups (Brinkmann, 2014). The interview focuses on key issues and engages with individuals’ feelings, beliefs, and experiences (Brinkmann, 2014). Drawing on previous scholarly literature, it is strongly suggested that there is a disconnect between the theory behind engagement and the practical implementations that teachers face. Qualitative research often gathers information directly from people interacting with their own environments, such as a teacher in a classroom and school environment (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews (more below) are designed to be relatively open-
ended. As teachers can have a wide range of experiences, beliefs, and perceptions on engagement and History, having open-ended interviews allows flexibility in their responses.

As above, the purpose of this study is to explore teachers’ experiences of engaging high school students in History. As such, it is important to conduct qualitative research as it involves participants telling stories to better understand “complex” issues (Creswell, 2007, p. 48). It is inappropriate to conduct this research study through quantitative measures because “statistical analysis simply does not fit the problem” (p. 48). In the interest of better understanding teacher experiences and strategies used in their classrooms, it is important to recognize the complexities and contexts that teachers are in; as such a quantitative study might not achieve this goal. With the data from the interviews, I synthesized the information with supporting academic research to better recognize and understand the experience under study.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

This research study collected data with semi-structured interviews using an interview guide (Appendix B). Furthermore, I used documentation and observation during the interviews to highlight noteworthy areas of further discussion or information. Moreover, an audio recorder was used to log the interview as to allow me to recall information or review what had been said.

The interviews were semi-structured to guide and facilitate the discussion with the interviewees in order to create a comfortable environment for the interviewee to discuss the topic within their own contexts. Semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewee to reflect through thought provoking questions, which brings the possibility of contrasting information and information that may not be necessarily obtained through a formal structured interview (Parker, 2005). Parker further argues that it is impossible to have a rigidly structured interview “because
people always say things that spill beyond the structure, before the interview starts and when the recorder has been turned off” (p. 53).

By contrast, a structured interview process is generally used to obtain a quantifiable amount of information through a standardized format (Conrad & Schober, 2008). The reason against using a structured interview in this research study is the personal belief that every teacher has a different set of experiences, teaching styles, skills, and strengths. Structured interviews are arguably passive dialogues that inhibit conversation, and stifle social interactions and freedom (Brinkmann, 2014). As teaching is heavily reliant on social and interactive meetings with students, a structured interview only hinders the interviewees from discussing their accounts and narratives. Referring to the research question, I focused on teachers and their strategies in fostering History student engagement in the secondary school level. In previous literature, it is mentioned that engagement is multi-dimensional and should take into account the experiences of everything from the teachers, students, environment, and activities. As student engagement is multi-dimensional, it is important to recognize the different contexts of teachers to better assess their strategies for achieving student interests in History. An unstructured interview can achieve this as it facilitates discussion and information through listening and observing the interviewees stories, experiences, and own observations (Brinkmann, 2014). The interview had little to no preparation as it relied on the interviewee narrating their life story while the interviewer must pick out and decipher what to pick out. One example would be the question: “Is there anything about this school that you feel makes it different from other schools or places you’ve worked?” where Petra elaborated on the experiences of every school she had taught in. It is integral that the interviewer remains an active listener and avoids disrupting the interviewee as they provided opportunities to expand on unique experiences (Brinkmann, 2014). Due to the time constraints of
this research study and the need to filter out a large quantity of data, using an unstructured interview is not the best method to proceed with the study.

3.3 Participants

For this research study, I interviewed two high school History teachers who have taught Applied History for a minimum of five years and have had experience teaching in low academically achieving schools. For the ethical guidelines of this project, the two participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. The two pseudonyms for the participants are Petra and Shane.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

To be eligible to participate in the study, the interviewees had to fit these criteria:

1. Have taught secondary History in Ontario for a minimum of five years with experience teaching in Applied.

2. Must have experience teaching in a school scoring an academic achievement score of 5.0 or lower from the Fraser Institute.

The reason for selecting participants with these criteria is because I wanted teachers to have had some experience working with History students. Teachers with under five years of experience may lack the adequate experience to be able to answer all the questions with sufficient depth and understanding. There is some evidence to suggest that low-achieving students are often disengaged with school and motivated only by punishment avoidance and short-term rewards. When unmotivated, students can perceive school to be boring, without value, and irrelevant (Crumpton & Gregory, 2010). As such, I wanted to interview teachers to examine the strategies
they use to re-engage disengaged students. Students that are intrinsically motivated tend to set goals and achieve higher academic scores versus those that are not motivated (Simons, Dewitte, & Lens, 2004). However, there has been little research on teachers’ strategies for motivating less-motivated students. Observing and interviewing teachers in low academic environments provided significant insight to the different strategies and necessities that teachers require to engage students in comparison to high academically achieving settings.

3.3.2. Recruitment procedures

For the purpose of my research study, I focused on participants with a certain set of characteristics, in specific, teachers that emphasized engagement. For this reason, I believe using a purposeful sampling achieved the desired results as purposeful sampling identified specific patterns in various cases, while reducing the chances of variation and simplifies analysis (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2013). As experiences among teachers are extremely subjective and can deviate between each individual, purposeful sampling alleviated the potential problems that can arise from outliers. Purposeful sampling is a technique commonly used in qualitative research to effectively recruit “information-rich” participants, (Palinkas et al., 2013, p. 534). It was particularly useful in identifying individuals of interest under limited resources because participants were more willing to express and articulate their experience and opinions in a reflective manner (Palinkas et al., 2013). Furthermore, due to the limitations for transportation, geographic location, and time constraints, I also used a mix between convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is a sampling technique that seeks participants that are easiest to access, especially under limited resources or time (Marshall, 1996). Snowball sampling is to find participants through recommendations from other research subjects (Marshall, 1996).
One potential issue that arose using convenience sampling and purposeful sampling was that participants were not chosen at random, and suffered from unintended biases. For example, when discussing about the History curriculum, Petra went on an off-tangent rant about her poor experience working in the Ministry ending off by saying, “there needed to be an intellectual respect for Applied students [in the curriculum]”. While, having a small sample of two teachers could skew the results of the research as two teachers cannot accurately depict effective strategies to foster engagement in all high school History students, the results were supported with the literature.

I found my participants by creating a list of schools from the Fraser Institute rankings and e-mailed History teachers from schools scoring an academic achievement score of 5.0 or under. I requested an in-person interview with these participants and asked questions to identify if they fit my research criteria. After they had agreed to an audio-recorded in-person interview, I sent them the consent form (Appendix A).

3.3.3 Participant biographies

The first participant, Petra, was born in Ontario and received her Ontario teaching certification over 25 years ago. Prior to teaching History, she has taught art, drama, religion, and English. She has taught History for almost 30 years. She is an avid collector of magazines and historical antiques, and is a world traveller. Most of her teaching has been at one school. Before she retired a short time ago, she was the head of the Canadian and World Studies department at her school.

The second participant, Shane, received his Ontario teaching certificate in 2004. He has taught History in one school in Ontario since 2005, but briefly taught English abroad as well. He
has served in the Canadian military and enjoys teaching students History through immersion and enactments. He is qualified to teach History and Religion and has a specialization in Religion.

3.4 Data Analysis

The coding process can be done using a two-cycle process: the first cycle is to attribute a symbol or phrase to represent sentences or segments of text. The second cycle is to outline the “essence” of each large segment in order to “capture the datum’s content” (Saldana, 2003, p. 3). In other words, to summarize and thematize a section of words to better understand the interviewee’s thoughts. I have followed a similar coding process of using an inductive approach to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. An inductive analysis is to understand and interpret raw data through detailed readings (Thomas, 2006). It aims to interpret information, themes, patterns, models, or concepts from the raw data by the researcher (Thomas, 2006). For this research study, I coded the transcripts and looked for broader themes that surface from the interviews. Moreover, I coded and transcribed the data, as it relates to my research purpose and questions while recognizing null data and discussing the significance of it.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Qualitative interviews are subjective and are based on human experiences. It allows researchers to “describe intimate aspects of people’s life worlds” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 157). As qualitative interviews examine the human experience, I considered possible ethical issues that may arise prior, during, and after the interview process (Creswell, 2007). Brinkmann
and Kvale (2005) suggest that interviewers risk disrespecting the boundaries of a person, especially if the interviewer want to scrutinize and probe for deep answers. When interviewing, I tried to press Shane for more information regarding a student that he tried to re-engage. He started by providing generic steps but could not tell a story about a specific student and the steps he took to engage them. After some attempts at retrieving an answer, it was clear that he was uncomfortable from the question as he responded with, “can we come back to this later?” In this example, questions may trigger traumatic or emotional responses, which led to the ethical dilemma of either delving further into these experiences, or to scrape the surface. The ethical dilemma was whether to lose valuable information in return of respecting the interviewee’s “emotional defenses” (170). In addition, there was also the ethical risk of a “faked friendship” (Duncombe & Jessop 2002) where qualitative interviewers create a comfortable and therapeutic environment during the interview with the sole intention of gathering information from participants. The participants were responding in colloquial terms and spoke as if speaking to a friend or fellow educational peer. There was also risk after conducting the interviews, as participants could have experienced regret from what they said or answered in the interview. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) outlines the risks after the interview:

1. The interview causing psychological damage or emotional distress.
2. Feeling as if they damaged their reputation or reputation of others.
3. Damage to a project, career, or organization they are involved in.

To combat the ethical issues that may arise from conducting the interviews and conforming to the University of Toronto’s (2007) guidelines and practices for research on human participants, I provided my participants with a letter of consent through e-mail. It included: my name and contact information, purpose of the study, what the interview consisted of, and a contact from
OISE in case of issues, questions, or further information. In addition, it asks for consent to having the interview be recorded, and the participant’s willingness to participate in the interview. I asked my participants to sign two copies of this letter, one for the participant to keep, and one for my own records. As per the University of Toronto’s (2007) guidelines and practices, I informed my participants that they could withdraw their consent at any point in time during or after the interview or signed consent without the need to provide any reason.

Any data collected from withdrawn participants was immediately deleted. All data collected was immediately encrypted with a password and backed up on an external hard drive. No collected data was uploaded to any Cloud-based website or server. Moreover, names, any information that may possibly identify the participants (location, general area, school, etc.) are changed in both the MTRP, transcript, any submission to the University of Toronto, and the instructor. All data collected will be deleted after five years from the submission of the MTRP. In addition, only the participant(s) knew where and when the interview will be conducted before, during, and after the interview process. After the interview process, a transcript could have been provided upon request from the participant. Participants could also request to omit sections or reword sections from the transcript at any reasonable time and with no given reason.
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The first and most prominent limitation is the number of participants. Having time to interview only two History teachers means that the data cannot be generalized to fit with the greater population (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007). However that may be, the research that was conducted provided useful information for the study of student engagement, History education, and teaching strategies. Another limitation of this qualitative study is the potential bias that may have incurred during the data analysis process from the researcher’s perceptions (Ochieng, 2009). One strength of qualitative studies is that it can simplify and manage complex information from interviews without skewing information (Ochieng, 2009). In this particular study, information was simplified from two lengthy interviews to better understand the teachers’ intentions of engaging students. The teachers spoke extensively on their life stories, emotional events, and traumatic experiences. One limitation of this particularly study was the range of experience in teaching Applied students from one of my participants. Petra, a retired teacher, taught Applied History early during her career and her experiences may not be as relevant to today’s standards and practices. While having taught Applied earlier in her career, her experiences are still valued and will help for constructing new perspectives on information. Both participant experiences can be open to interpretation and allow for the discovery of new findings, such as how both participants shared similar views to textbook usage (Ochieng, 2009).

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I explained the research methodology. I started with a discussion of the research approach and procedures, discussing the significance of qualitative research in relation to student engagement, and showcasing some reasons to why quantitative measures are inappropriate to this study. Next, I described the instruments of data collection by comparing and
contrasting among structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. I then provided information about my research participants, listed the criteria applied to all interviewees, and provided brief introductions for those selected. I also described recruitment procedures which entailed purposive sampling to maximize the richness and depth of data obtained, as well as convenience and snowball sampling due to the overall extent and scope of the research study. Afterwards, I included the data analyzed from the interviews. General ethical issues such as interviewee boundaries, false friendships, and post-interview harm were considered. In addition, an overview of consent, risks of participation, member-checks, right to withdraw, and data storage were also considered, and ways to address these potential issues were recognized. Lastly, I discussed the methodological limitations of the study, such as the interpretive abilities and biases of the researcher, while also highlighting some of the strengths, such as the ability to discover new findings through first-hand participant experiences. In the next chapter, I report on the findings of the research.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

The following chapter highlights and explores the prominent themes that emerged through the analysis of the data collected through the interviews with the participants of this study. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016 and in the fall of 2016 with Ontario high school History teachers. The teachers had to have taught Applied History in Ontario for a minimum of five years and have a focus in engaging their students. The goal of this paper is to examine the experiences of the research participants to better understand the nature of engagement in a History classroom and to help History teachers better engage students. To achieve this, research data was obtained from two qualitative interviews with Ontario History teachers (pseudonyms Shane and Petra) who have taught the grade 10 Applied History course. Both History teachers have taught Applied History under the Ontario curriculum for over 5 years and have taught in schools scoring an academic achievement score of 5.0 or lower from the Fraser Institute. The significance behind this sampling criteria is to examine how teachers in low academic environments motivate unmotivated students. As there is little research in this field, the sampling criteria is intended to shed insight into this area.

The central research question was: how are Ontario grade 10 History teachers fostering student engagement? Research findings from my study are organized in the following themes: 1. teacher perceptions of engagement, 2. resources used in a History classroom, and 3. teacher challenges. Each theme is further divided into sub-themes and is supported by data from interviews with research participants. The research data did not appear to directly answer the central research question; however, in conjunction with the answers to the sub-questions, there is an indirect answer to the central research question.
In the interviews conducted, educators experienced difficulties in defining “student engagement”. As the research study focuses on student engagement, it is integral to first examine teacher understandings of student engagement. As such, the first theme explores the sub-questions: “What does “student engagement” mean to teachers? What indicators of engagement do teachers perceive from students?” This section looks at educators’ definitions of student engagement and the indicators educators interpret as engagement in students. Research data suggested that History teachers often rely on a variety of resources such as textbooks and primary sources as tools to help foster student engagement. The second theme, resources used in a History classroom, discusses different tools History teachers use to foster student engagement. This theme is broken down into subsections that explore findings on the usage of textbooks, and primary sources. Lastly, the third theme discusses how research participants believed students are disengaged because of the lack personal relevance of course materials. The third theme relates to the sub-questions: “What kind of challenges do teachers face when trying to engage students? How do they confront them?” This category discusses the educators’ challenges in engaging students and what steps they take to work with them. The three main challenges educators faced were making History personally relevant for students, perceived differences between student engagement in the Applied and Academic streams, and having students disengaged the moment they enter the History classroom.

4.1 Teachers’ Definitions and Perceptions of Student Engagement

These teachers had difficulty defining student engagement and intrinsic motivation. The participants based their definition of engagement on behavioural indicators such as smiling or completing tasks. Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) define it as “a student’s psychological investment in and effort directed towards learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge skills or crafts” (p. 12). When asked “How would you define active student
engagement,” my participants paused for a minute or so to try and sum up their experiences. Shane said simply, "I think if they are happy if they are smiling. If they are smiling, they are most engaged." Meanwhile, Petra outlined her two criteria for a student to be engaged: “when a student walks into the classroom and they are smiling, that is the first step,” and then later added that “the big thing for me to think that they are engaged is if they ask good questions”. Smiling was the most readily stated indicator of engagement for both teachers. Both participants used facial expressions as indicators to define their understanding of engagement. Interestingly, when asked to define engagement, both participants struggled to articulate a concrete definition but could only express it through student action. To clarify their answers and obtain a better understanding of their perception of engagement, they were asked “what do you think intrinsic motivation looks like,” both participants stammered and attempted to guess a definition of intrinsic motivation. Petra responded by saying, “Whether it is even... I don’t know... it could be a part of their personality. Intrinsic suggests to me a built in [sic]”. Shane expressed his answer to this question by saying, “So... I think intrinsic motivation is if you assign homework and they do it... kids don’t have intrinsic motivation unless you’re there standing over them or pressuring them to do work.”

Their responses strongly suggest a level of difficulty in understanding what exactly “intrinsic motivation” is. When re-phrased, Shane suggested that intrinsic motivation is very rare in general even outside an Applied History class, “They [Applied History students] don’t care [about class], they don’t care about their mark… you’re starting an assumption in a master’s course that people will actually do their work right? Because you are all intrinsically motivated because you’re paying for it all?” Kahu (2013) examines many definitions of student engagement and argues that engagement is multi-dimensional, meaning that it has no one
specific pattern, formula, or definition. The participants appeared to have struggled to pinpoint a concrete definition of engagement. Students may be smiling because they had a good day, heard a funny joke, or just naturally smile. While smiling can indicate engagement, it is impossible to pinpoint whether or not smiling determines actual engagement. Many researchers support the notion that engagement has behavioural components, such as smiling (Appleton et al., 2008; Yonezawa, Jones, & Joselowsky, 2009; Astin, 1999; Axelson & Flick, 2011; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Parrish, 2009). If participants identify smiling or asking good questions as their sole factors for student engagement, this might indicate that teachers attempt to qualify engagement only through behaviours. Petra’s answer for engagement supported Axelson and Flick’s (2011) theory that student engagement is evaluated through their interest and connection with a course. A study done on 45 people (23 men, 22 women) also supported both participant’s observations. In the study, they examined three hypothesizes for why people smile. One finding was that smiling is a behavioural response to signify cooperation and understanding among individuals (Mehu & Dunbar, 2008).

4.1.1 Teacher factors influencing student engagement

My participants perceived that positive environments help foster engagement in classrooms. They convey this through different means and measures such as establishing care or compelling storytelling. One reason my participants found it difficult to define student engagement could be from their different experiences. Petra mentioned how she taught for almost 30 years, and in those years, she had met students from all backgrounds, experiences, and saw different reasons for students being disengaged. When asked if she ever tried to engage a student who was never engaged, she later explained that “I had many of them [experiences]. Many of them.” One student she speaks fondly about was one who was disengaged because of
his experiences in school, home, and choice of friends. She voiced that at first he, “[came] to our school from being kicked out from someplace else, and was quite a tough nut. … he would start fighting in class and be very obnoxious to other students … and he would always talk back to me.” She later explained that to engage him she would try her best to show that she cared, gave him multiple opportunities to succeed, and continually tried to encourage him:

I never threw him out of class… and it took me months to try and convince him that any kind of things that I tried to get him to do, or any time I tried to stop him from doing things I did not think were good was because it mattered to me what happened to him.

In the end, she mentions how she realized her hard work paid off when, “He came in and he hugged me in the end [after exams] and told me that he knew that I really cared about him and he knew that I wanted him to succeed.” Essentially, Petra believed that care, encouragement, and patience would ultimately influence students to be engaged.

Shane, on the other hand, believed that student engagement is dependent upon the teacher’s actions:

Be energetic, you gotta sing a song and dance, if you're bored then they'll be bored right?

So how entertaining can you be? So history is basically being a storyteller. How many stories can you tell and how can you bring it alive for them?

He implied that engaging students in History required teacher expression, and entertaining storytelling. While both participants have different explanations as to how they engaged students, for both teachers it comes down to positive interactions with students. Lazare (2005) found that students with emotional bonds to the content appear to perform better academically and recall narratives in stories with greater ease. Furthermore, both educators aim to create a positive
emotional climate in the classroom. Petra conveyed care, encouragement, and patience to her students to develop a positive environment. Shane developed his positive classroom environment through energy, avid storytelling, and entertainment.

4.2. Resources & Activities Used in a History Lesson

History teachers who self-consciously work to engage students use a range of resources and activities such as dramatic reenactments, simulations, and tweaking content into personally relevant forms. The purpose of this is to combat the passive consumerism of teaching. Passive consumerism occurs when teachers teach History without effectively utilizing activities, textbooks, or primary sources (Gibson, 2014). Petra combated passive consumerism of History by explaining how she would have students act out skits, or recreate shows. “I tried to find things that where they would be interested in something. But it also applied to the things we were learning, from talk shows to radio shows, and making up things and having kids dress up.” Shane, on the other hand, tried to manipulate activities and material into content in a way that students resonated with the content. Shane described one activity that involved making content personally relevant:

we did a WWI simulation where we break down into 7 countries and it’s on almost a Yu-Gi-Oh or Pokémon card game and you got attack and defence, and they have to decide on actions and team up and you got special moves like assassination, and poison gas attack.

When asked how successful the activity was, he responded by saying, “they were happy and excited and wanted to do it. I think that’s where you get the most engagement and that’s totally simulations, and practical experiences.” Having students be active participants in activities reportedly helped engage students in the material. Both participants utilized different methods
that worked for their classes and showed that there is no one correct method to engage students. Cooper and McIntyre’s (1994) study supported the idea of having students be active participants when learning History. They found that students tend to enjoy learning about History when they interact with the material they are learning. As such, it is important to have students actively participate in activities to combat the passive consumerism of History. While both educators used different methods, both tried to make the material important and purposeful to students by having them play an important role in their own learning process.

4.2.1 Teacher perspectives on textbook usage and its implications on student engagement

While the participants are aware of the disengaging effect textbooks can have on students, they often relied on them because they have a wealth of resources, are something to fall back on, and are in tune with the curriculum. In both cases, participants insinuated that textbooks were not the most engaging tools but still fully utilized them in their classes. They felt like it assisted in their teaching, provided an anchor for students to follow, and it helped follow the curriculum. Petra communicated that “I know some people don’t even use the textbook and I get why they say that, because students can be engaged in so many other levels.” However, she justified the use of textbooks by confessing that, “sometimes the textbook was not that helpful. There is always the temptation, like myself, as I’m not being critical, but the textbook can be a little bit of a crutch.” Petra’s statement suggests that while educators are aware that textbooks may not be useful, they are a useful support for teachers to teach students. Shane also implied a negative connotation to textbook usage: “[so] we got the appropriate textbooks as a starting point. We aren’t supposed to teach from textbooks but it already has a structure and is tied to the curriculum.” Shane’s response to using textbooks leads to the belief that textbooks are intended to be a where teachers are to begin their planning process, but choose to follow it because doing
so fulfills the basic requirements to teach the course. Both participants conveyed the message that they are aware of the pitfalls and limitations of textbooks in regards to engagement; however, they still ended up using it because it was an easy supplementary tool for their teaching, and it conveniently is supported by the curriculum. Petra stated clearly, “I see the textbook as an anchor and this goes for both Academic and Applied classes, and for university and college. It’s an anchor. It is not the be all end all kind of thing, but it is still very important.” Shane explained in further detail that one reason teachers use textbooks is because of the wealth of resources it contains. He signifies this when talking about selecting textbooks,

we got the brand new textbooks and the new curriculum for Academic. We didn't buy the Applied because we found they were... they didn't really have many sources as the Academic so it was like buying the old textbooks we had so I guess they had trouble finding the appropriate sources for kids.

Interestingly, both participants justified textbook use and proposed that it was a useful tool as an anchor for educators.

Research supports the disengaging effects textbooks can have on students. Harris and Haydn’s (2006) study of high school History students and found that students expressed displeasure when teachers relied on textbooks and worksheets. One explanation as to why both participants acknowledge the disengaging effects of textbooks is that there is a lack of cognitive engagement required in reading textbooks. Lazare (2005) found that textbooks do not promote emotional investment in the narrative to support student engagement. When given an emotionally charged historical account of World War II in a textbook, students felt little to moderate emotional response. He found that students tend to manipulate their work to the
textbook and to the teacher’s expectations through memorization to achieve high grades. Overall, there is evidence to suggest that textbooks are inefficient and that my participants recognize the limited nature of textbooks, but still rely on them for because they provide a source to follow and anchor themselves in.

4.2.2 Teacher perceptions of primary sources and artefacts and their effect on student engagement

The participants believe primary sources are important to History and reportedly try to implement and integrate the use of primary sources in the classroom where possible. They recognize that primary sources are a tool that engages students. Petra wholeheartedly supported the use of primary sources and tried to integrate primary sources in her lessons. She cited many examples of where she used primary sources – many of which were from her own collection of resources:

I like to use a lot of primary sources, whether it comes from newspapers… stories of what the textbook said… and that included advertisements for things. They were always fascinated with how things cost and I would bring a Sears catalogue from the 1970s and have the kids look at it, or Life Magazines. And the one kids liked a lot was, I brought in a ten thousand reichsbanknote that was printed in 1922, and the kids loved that as well and we talked about you know, the Devil Face in it and stuff. They liked engaging in stuff like that, and because it had another level of interest in that as well and they could hold it and look and touch it.

In comparison to textbooks, she believed that primary sources helped engage students because it allowed students to play, explore, and interact with history in a physical way.
Similarly, Shane supported the use of primary sources but mentions some limitations of using historical sources and the amount of time needed to plan a lesson with it:

Any historical sources, anything Prime Minister debates, newspaper articles, they are going to be at a higher level of reading or writing. So grade 10 Applied, you know, are not going to be necessarily be there. So it will be discouraging, and they might find it boring, so, so it does require more planning too right? Because you gotta curate the sources. If you have artifacts you gotta bring it in, you gotta find them.

Shane’s statement indicates that students in Applied History may struggle with reading and writing skills. As such, having physical, non-textual, artefacts like newspapers, photographs, or recordings in class could help them better understand and learn about material as they can explore it in a way that they understand best. One problem associated with artefacts, however, is that finding them is time consuming. When asked “how do you think we can make history more engaging for students?” He immediately responded,

you got the museum, but there’s nothing for a Canadian 20th century history course.
Great stuff for grade 11. Egypt, artifacts, they do a great lab. But what do they have for 20th century Canadian history? There’s not all that much out there so the ministry is putting a ton of money in numeracy right now because they just dropped their results…. We need more resources [for History], we need more curated sources that is appropriate for levels other than academic.

While these History teachers believed and supported the use of primary sources as tools to engage students, they often found that obtaining primary sources and artefacts is time consuming. Petra had accumulated many primary sources and artefacts over many years to bring to class.
Shane struggled to find artefacts and wished the Ministry would provide more sources for Applied History teachers to use in their classrooms.

Researchers and historian educators also believe that primary sources are more engaging for students and further add that it is required to build a foundation in better understanding History (Sandwell 2011; Seixas 2011; Gibson 2014).

4.3 History Teacher Challenges in Engaging Students

Teachers reportedly face numerous challenges when it comes to engaging students in History. Teachers from this study encountered challenges in making the History curriculum relevant, personally interesting, and also combating a ‘natural disengagement’ to History. Shane talked about how teachers must make sound decisions on what to teach and what to omit when planning their History lessons. He expressed,

So when going through WWII too, you should focus on the battles and the political events, so you gotta bring in what is the role of women, what is the role of working people, what is the role of resistors, what were Aboriginal and African-Canadians doing during this time? So you have almost double content so you either have to water down what kids are learning or choose what to focus.

History teachers sometimes feel overwhelmed about the amount of content they must cover, while having to make it relevant and interesting to them. Shane continued by saying,

The question is do you include the history that is relevant to what you are doing in the course, or do you include something that is not relevant and interesting to the scope of the course?… we were talking about it in class, how do you make it relevant for students in
class? Now I've got Filipinos, and in terms of what ties are in the curriculum in 20th century Canadian History?

Axelson and Flick (2011) support Shane’s experiences as they found that engagement comes from their interest to the academic material or activities. Petra also experienced issues in preparing interesting and relevant material for her Applied History classes when she communicated one major project that her students need to do each year,

you have to make it about them in a sense… I want them to learn about History. I want them to know these things because it is important for their understanding for them and for the world. I particularly liked doing History Fair where the kids would work and it wasn’t just for academics, but we had a trophy for the Academic and the Applied [streams]. There was prize money… it was a real chore but many kids did learn things about research and some dressed up!

Petra would plan extensively and work with other teachers when doing a History Fair, where students would “pick a topic in Canadian History and research about it.” Working in tandem with other teachers, she said, “some found it to be a terrible chore, and some found it a terrible terrible [sic] chore, and it was! You were marking their research at every stage of the game.” In addition making material interesting, Shane expressed another challenge he encounters: how unmotivated his students are when they come to his class. He said,

what is particular to a history class is that first of all, you know, never assume they will be engaged or be self-directed learners. If you get that, bonus, and do everything you can do engage them but start from the expectation that they won't be interested and it is your job to make it interesting. So don't get frustrated if they don't care or they don't know
anything because if you feel that way it is very easy to get cynical. So you have to start with the assumption that they won't care and work your way up there. It is not their fault and not your fault. Your job is to make them interested.

Shane strongly felt that his students came into class unmotivated and disinterested in History. Petra also encountered this issue and tried to explain possible reasons for this disinterest when she said,

maybe they hated elementary school History, and that they didn’t like learning about New France, the fur traders, and stuff. And I found that so often I would always poll my classes whether they liked history elementary school, and only one or two hands would come up. And when I asked how many hated it, and there would be lots of hands up.

Lazare’s (2005) study reinforced both participant’s experiences as he had similar results when he had participants, fifty-four grade 12 and OAC students from a multicultural urban high school in Toronto, “willingly checked their emotions at the door of the history classroom” and felt that “emotional engagement with history is primarily an extra-curricular activity” (p. 52). Overall, teachers face multiple challenges in the classroom, from making tasks that are relevant and interesting, to having students walk in naturally disengaged.

4.3.1 Differences between Academic and Applied History students

Educators perceive a clear difference between attitudes and learning needs of Academic and Applied History students. Petra claimed that in “Academic classes, many if not all students come in with an idea of what they want to be doing… in classes at the Applied level, the students are not necessarily in the same frame of mind.” She said that for Applied students, “preparation needs to be more rigorous… did I do all the things students in an Academic class would do like
writing a well-formed essay? I would do that sometimes but very seldom… I find that a little bit too rigid. I think it is very important to have a sense of that while preparing your lesson.” Petra insinuated that preparing for Applied classes required a more “rigorous” level of preparation because the students would prefer learning material that is less “rigid”. Shane also felt that there are different expectations associated with Applied students. He asserted that,

you can’t accept in an Applied class to count on the kids to go home and read before class. So in an Applied class, you gotta introduce whether it’s a PowerPoint, reading from the textbook, or a story, or notes on the board, you have to have some form of teacher directed contextualization and then you can shift anything else.

His statement makes it clear that, in preparing for an Applied lesson, a teacher may need to teach and introduce all content during class time as it is not always expected that Applied students will read outside of class. He further stressed the differences by saying, “self-directed learning, group work, need to be taught in the Applied level because it is not something they are socialized to…. In Applied, if you assume that they can even bring the things [textbook, notes] to class, then you are going to encounter a lot of frustrations.” Shane’s experiences suggested that Applied students struggled with focusing on task, bringing materials to school, and handling co-operative learning. It signified that these challenges can affect educators in their planning of course material and teaching lessons, as they needed to spend more time with classroom management and had difficulties conducting differentiated instruction. Petra also suggested that Applied students encounter issues with low feelings of accomplishment that may deter them from trying in class:

Some people say that’s crazy, that’s just parroting things, but I would make a fill-in-the-blank sheet based on stuff that they saw that they could read in their textbook. It was
something that a lot of the kids responded to well even though it did not really count much in marks but they could get through it…. It gave them a sense of success.

This statement signified that some teachers may also need to boost Applied History students’ academic confidence as another method of engaging students. History Teachers found that they needed more time to prepare their lessons for Applied students by: finding easier-to-comprehend material, prepare activities that scaffold or avoid: self-directed learning or co-operative learning. They also believe that teaching Applied History students require additional time for classroom management.

4.4 Conclusion

While analyzing my interview data, I discovered how different teachers perceive engagement. Furthermore, I was most surprised to hear about the types of challenges educators faced when engaging students. Throughout researching about engagement, I had not encountered data about educators needing to boost student confidence with easier material. For the most part, both my participants shared similar views and attitudes on teaching, such as their criteria and understanding of student engagement.

Petra and Shane believed that students are most engaged when they are smiling and asking questions in class. Next, both contributed to how they maintained and promoted a positive classroom environment. Petra utilized care, encouragement, and support, while Shane prefers entertainment and storytelling as motivators to be engaged in class. Furthermore, both participants relied on resources and activities to engage the class. Petra preferred students enact in radio shows or TV shows to be engaged and demonstrate their understanding. Shane on the other hand, would try and mold content in a format familiar to students, such as making World War I into a children’s card game. One surprising aspect was how teachers reacted to textbooks.
They admittedly believed textbooks were either discouraged or not the most effective tools to support student learning, but still utilized them regularly in their practice. They found it to be a useful anchor for student learning, especially because it follows the curriculum. In addition to using the textbook, teachers often incorporated primary sources or artefacts in their lessons because they find students to be engaged when interacting with them. Petra would bring her collection of artefacts to the class to have students touch and play with them. Meanwhile, Shane comments that not all students can understand primary documents. He disparages the Ministry in the lack of resources and support for Applied History and wants more curated sources to support student learning and engagement.

Beyond primary sources and the collection of artefacts, teachers also experience many challenges when teaching students. My participants had difficulties planning lessons with material that was relevant and interesting to students, and encountered students coming into class already feeling disengaged. On top of all that, these teachers reported that, in their experience, students in Applied history come to class often unprepared and lacking focus. History Teachers often need to plan more rigorously to prepare for these students and take time to curate sources for students to interact with in class. Furthermore, History students in Applied are unfamiliar with some learning styles, which leads teachers to either scaffold different methods for them, or teach in a manner that they recognize the most. This limits the options teachers have to prepare their lessons. All in all, both participants provided deep insights on strategies, resources, and challenges faced when fostering student engagement. It has helped me gain a great understanding of how History students can be engaged, but also helps better understand why students may be disengaged in the first place. I have been amazed and honoured to be able to speak with these
teachers about their experiences, and their experiences have shed light on the life of an Applied History teacher.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

This final chapter focuses on explaining and elaborating on the findings conducted in this research. It makes narrow and broad implications between the data with my positioning as a teacher candidate and the greater educational community, respectively. Next, I recommend actions and suggestions to help teachers, the Ministry of Education of Ontario, and the greater educational community to gain a better understanding of engagement in Applied History teachers. Lastly, I discuss important areas of future research on the topic of History student engagement.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

The interviews conducted with Ontario high school History teachers explored the topic of strategies to foster engagement for Applied high school History students. The three themes that emerged are: teachers’ perceptions of student engagement, resources used in a History classroom, and teacher challenges in engaging a History classroom. The first theme of Chapter Four conveys that History teachers find themselves responsible for engaging students. They believe that they must play a role such as a storyteller, entertainer, or encourager to have students be engaged. Furthermore, they often see students as engaged through activities or completion of tasks, such as finishing homework, asking questions, or just smiling in class. The next theme examines the resources and tools History teachers utilize to engage their students. Teachers often use textbooks, primary sources, and artefacts to engage students in their class. Literature previously examined suggested that textbooks tend to disengage students from learning, which is also supported by participant experiences. Even so, the interviewees still relied on textbooks as a guideline to follow curriculum expectations. For primary sources and artefacts, participants believed that while physical materials piqued student interests, they were time-consuming and required time to find. For example, Petra would often bring Third Reich banknotes, or Shane
would take students on a field trip to demo trench warfare. They would often use primary sources and artefacts to reinforce their points and help actualize student learning. Lastly, History teachers reportedly found themselves facing obstacles when teaching Applied students, such as difficulty finding culturally relevant materials. This study contributes to helping the educational community learn and understand Applied History teachers, their strategies for engaging students, and the challenges they encounter when engaging students.

5.2 Implications

In this next section, I discuss the broad and narrow implications from my research. I first address the broad implications of my findings directed towards students, teachers, and the parental community. For narrow implications, I discuss the implications towards my own professional identity and practice as a teacher.

5.2.1 Broad: The educational research community

Both Petra and Shane agreed that passive consumerism of History occurs when students are taught without engaging activities or materials such as teaching with a textbook. They both try to introduce a variety of useful activities, discussions, and interactions with artefacts to combat the passive consumption of History. However, both participants disclosed that they relied on the textbook to teach their classes, explaining that it both helped them follow the curriculum and provided a wealth of resources. It is important to recognize that teachers may stress the use of textbooks not as a tool of engagement, but as a guidance tool for History teachers to follow curriculum. The next implication involves challenges teachers face when teaching in Applied History. Petra and Shane suggest that in some low-achieving schools, students may experience out-of-school issues that impeded their learning. These problems can impact and affect classroom management, behaviour, and focus for schools as a whole. As Shane puts it, when
students encounter violence and abuse outside of school, “school comes last when that’s your living experience”. Next, teachers often find themselves spending more time with classroom management and spending additional time helping students to focus on tasks. Another implication from my findings is that Applied history teachers may experience a lack of resources for Applied History in comparison to other History courses like the grade 11 World History course. Shane claims that the lack of resources makes it difficult for teachers to find excellent primary sources, such as debate recordings or newspaper articles for students and that it requires a heavy personal time commitment to find them. In other words, Applied History students may benefit from an improved list of resources, such as artefacts or primary source materials, to engage student learning.

5.2.2 Narrow: Professional identity and practice

While in the process and writing of this study, I have found significant implications for my own teaching practice and professional identity. As an avid protestor of textbook usage in History, the first major implication is the explanation for why some History teachers use textbooks in their classes. While my participants shared their experiences with classroom management and limited interest for History in Applied classes, I came to understand why History teachers consider using textbooks to teach Applied classes. History teachers may have to teach with limited resources and attempt to integrate primary sources into their teaching. In order to do that, they may need to cultivate their collection of resources within their own time. It helps me consider the broader issues that may affect History teachers plan, teach, and engage students. Furthermore, my participants explained that they recognized students to be engaged when they completed tasks, homework, asked questions, or smiled in their classes. It made me realize the difficulty in pinpointing when exactly students are engaged in History. In addition to this, Petra
and Shane expressed the challenges their students faced in their daily lives outside of school. As an upcoming teacher, it is often hard to distinguish why students may be engaged or disengaged in Applied History. This leads me to better understand that students may have hidden struggles that inhibit their capabilities to learn. As Petra mentioned, she believes that showing care and concern for students will help students be more engaged in their learning. To her, showing care presents to students that she teaches for their education and for their good, not for the sake of only doing her job. I will carry this new knowledge in my role as a History teacher byacknowledging the required care, time, and effort needed to teach Applied History students.

5.3 Recommendations

From the broad implications, I recommend to the Ministry of Education of Ontario to provide more diverse resources to help Applied History teachers utilize the textbook less or to instruct them to use the textbook in engaging methods. One article suggests having an activity where students de-authorize textbooks and challenge its facts and findings (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan & Worthy, 1996). Next, I recommend to teachers and the educational community to better come to understand the struggles that teachers may encounter when teaching in Applied classes. Petra mentioned how she felt that teachers pejoratively perceived Applied classes to be easier, for “dumber” kids, and/or as a “throwaway class”. I hope that this study will help bring awareness of the challenges and struggles Applied teachers encounter in their classrooms, and also reduce stigma against Applied-streamed courses. Lastly, I recommend to faculties of Education to provide more support for pre-service teachers in preparing to teach Applied and at-risk students.

5.4 Areas for Further Research
Presently, there is a plethora of research on engagement and on the state of History in Canada as a whole. However, there is ample room to study the role of engagement in the context of an Ontario classroom. Most of the articles found on classroom engagement belonged to American or British sources. There is a perceived lack of interest in studying engagement of Ontario History students due to it being mandatory only in grade 10. However, Canadian History is one of the only courses that provide students with historical knowledge of its country and helps the student find itself within the history of Canada as a nation. As such, it is important to conduct further research into identifying strategies to foster History student engagement and to minimize disengagement. While Canadian literature was utilized, the majority of research studies found were on British or American History classrooms, which signals a perceived gap of knowledge with how Canadian students engage with History. There is a lack of research done to assess how History students are being taught in a country-wide scale since Hodgetts published *What Culture? What Heritage* in 1968 where he observed hundreds of schools to conclude that History was taught in a “bland,” “dry-as-dust chronological story” (Hodgetts, 1968, p. iii). Furthermore, most sources discussed about average students or schools. In summary, more research is needed to examine how to make Canadian Applied History classrooms engaging to help students better recognize their role as an active citizen of their country.

5.5 Comments

The purpose of this study was to better understand, identify, and recognize strategies that History teachers are using to engage Applied students. It is intended to help students, teachers, and the greater educational community understand how Applied History teachers teach their students, and the challenges they encounter when doing so. With a passion for History and for education, I have a strong interest in exploring the intersectionality of academic streaming, class,
and social status in accordance to education. As a result of that, I wish for others to understand my love and passion for History. Recognizing that History is an abstract subject, I wanted to conduct this study with teachers to examine how they taught an abstract subject with in Applied classrooms. While conducting my interviews, I felt a strong connection to the interviewees when hearing about their plights, struggles, and how they managed to overcome them when teaching Applied History. As such, I hope this study will not only succeed in illustrating my passion for History, but to show the difficulties and challenges that History teachers can encounter when preparing resources and strategies to engage Applied students.
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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. As a student in a pre-service teaching program, I am interested in learning how Ontario History teachers engage students. Findings obtained from this study may be informative for not only current and preservice History teachers, but with the entire educational community. 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. 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 an approximately 60 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.

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 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 audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. Given the topic of History student engagement guiding the research questions, a minute risk with partaking in the study is that questions may produce emotional or possible traumatic responses, which could cause the interviewee to feel vulnerable. To address this, you will be provided with the questions ahead of time. There are no other known risks 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.

Sincerely,

Patrick Chui
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 Patrick Chui and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): ___________________________________

Date: ________________
Appendix B

Introductory Script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn how a sample of History teachers recognize and address student engagement for the purpose of better understanding strategies for fostering student engagement. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your own teaching experiences.

I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

A. Background Information

1. Can you start by describing your current job title and responsibilities in your current position? (Official title and responsibilities)
2. Can you tell me a bit about your formal training: where you studied, when you got your degree and how long ago you completed your schooling?
3. How long have you been a secondary school teacher?
4. How long have you been teaching History in Ontario?
5. I’d like to get a feel for the school that you last worked in. How would you describe to a new family that may be enrolling their child there next year? Such as, demographics, academic focus, neighborhood, etc.
   a. Is there anything about this school that you feel makes it different from other schools or places you’ve worked?
   b. Could you list some of the core values of this school community?
   c. What do you enjoy about working at this school? What are some challenges about working at this school?

B. Teacher Practices

1. Can you walk me through a typical lesson in your Applied History classes?
   a. In comparison to your Applied History classes, how would your lesson for an Academic or Enriched classes look like?
   b. Could you tell me a bit more details on the planning process for this lesson/activity/lecture?
   c. What kind of resources have you used (planning, activity, lecture, resources, ICT, etc.)
2. How has your teaching practice been shaped and changed over the years?
3. Think back to what you feel was one of the greatest lessons you have given in History.
   a. What made this lesson stand out compared to the rest?
i. Can you tell me what the planning process was like for this activity?
   1. Why did you decide to prioritize this?
   ii. What kind of resources did you use? Why did you decide to use them?
      b. What were some students’ responses to the lesson?
4. Can you tell me about a lesson that didn’t go as well as you expected it would?
   a. How did the students respond to the lesson?
   b. What would you have liked to have done differently?
5. I have often heard that one of the hardest things a History teacher experiences is engaging students in the content.
   a. How would you define active student engagement?
   b. What does this ‘look like’ in your experience?
   c. What do you think ‘intrinsic’ motivation looks like?
6. Can you tell me about a time when you had to engage a disengaged student.
   a. What would you like to tell me about this student that you think is relevant?
      i. What do you think caused their disengagement from History?
   b. What are some strategies you used to foster their engagement?
      i. Were these successful? Why/not?
   c. Would you say this student is typical of a disengaged History student?
      i. Why/not?
7. In your experience, did you find that the resources you are provided with in your school e.g., textbooks or technology are helpful or hindering in terms of fostering student engagement in History?
   a. If yes, why?
      i. If yes, how did these resources help foster student engagement?
   b. If no, why not?
      i. If no, how did you circumvent the lack of resources to engage students?
8. What do you think makes teaching Applied History different from teaching in other History streams?
   a. What aspects are the same?
9. Do you think there are engagement challenges particular each stream?
   a. What are the particular challenges associated with Applied?
   b. How about Academic?

C. Supports and Challenges

1. How do you think we can make History more engaging for students?
   a. Do you think that including some history that is more personally relevant or ‘interesting’ could help in facing this challenge?
      i. Why do you think it can/cannot help?

Conclusion

1. What advice would you give me as a new teacher on engaging students in the History classroom?
2. Do you have any final thoughts?