TEACHER PERCEPTIONS ON THE SOCIAL JUSTICE IMPACT OF SAEED'S SKITS IN AMERICAN HISTORY CLASSROOMS

A Dissertation Presented to the
Faculty of the College of Education
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Sheryl Raffat Saeed

May 2017

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Approved by Dissertation Committee:

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Dr. Cameron White, Chairperson

_____

Dr. Lee Mountain, Committee Member

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Dr. Samuel Brower, Committee Member

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Dr. Bernardo Pohl, Committee Member

_____

Dr. Robert H. McPherson, Dean

College of Education

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Acknowledgments

This research is dedicated to my late father, Lee Doyle Lawson (1939-2001). I thought he was the smartest man in the world. Saeed's skits would not exist if I had not inherited Daddy's goofy sense of humor! I miss him every single day, and I know if he were alive today he would be brimming with delight about the history skits I have created.

To my mom, Trudy Ann Lawson: thank you for being the best mom on earth, and my first reading and writing teacher. Just like countless other times in my life, the help you provided as I completed my dissertation was indispensable. I could not have done it without you. I love you so much!

To Dr. James Semones, my freshman sociology professor and ongoing mentor: you were one of my major academic inspirations. You made me fall in love with sociology for a lifetime. In addition, your insistence upon extremely high expectations played an integral role in my long-term academic success. I can never thank you enough!

I am very thankful to my "dream team" committee members. Because of the admiration and trust I feel for each one of them, I specifically requested their presence on my dissertation committee. I am thankful for the knowledge and support they have provided to me along the doctoral path.

To my advisor and dissertation committee chair, Dr. Cameron White: you suggested this doctoral program to me over a decade ago, when I was a participant in the Teaching American History grant program. I am proud to be associated with the Social Education program that you helped to create, as it perfectly meshes with my personality and life goals in a way that gives me an even greater sense of purpose and structure going

forward. I am immensely fortunate to have an advisor, colleague, and friend like you! Thank you for being such an important part of my life.

To Dr. Lee Mountain: I will be eternally grateful for the day I met you in Dr. Olenchak's class, when you served as a guest speaker. I'm sure that experience led me to actively seek to enroll in your course during the summer of 2014. Your extremely structured-yet-supportive teaching style really helped me to make strides in my progress as a doctoral researcher, and ultimately helped me to get my first article published. Your expertise and high expectations in scholarly writing have been crucial to my development as a researcher. You inspire me to do great things, and for that I will always love you! Having you on my committee means the world to me.

To Dr. Samuel Brower: Each time you and I ended up in the same doctoral class together over the past decade, I found you to be professional, friendly, and extremely knowledgeable. After you graduated and moved on to an assistant professorship, I maintained such positive memories of you as a colleague that you were a natural choice for my dissertation committee. Thank you for the astute advice and detailed notes you have provided at each step of my dissertation journey.

To Dr. Bernardo Pohl: Thank you for your friendship, your positivity, and for the many days that you went out of your way to sit with me at Pink's Pizza as we discussed how I could improve my dissertation. I can only hope that one day I can serve in the same capacity for other doctoral students who come after me. Please always know how much your help meant to me!

To Dr. Cheryl Craig: Your encouragement was the catalyst that helped me get the ball rolling on my research. As a student in your class, I felt inspiration and confidence

that helped me to lay the groundwork for my literature review. By the time your class was over, I had a much clearer vision of my research goals. Thank you for being such a trusted role model and friend to your students!

To Dr. Mimi Lee: Your class was integral to providing the sense of confidence I felt throughout my data analysis process. I would highly recommend your valuable course to any doctoral student now coming through the program. Thank you so much!

To Debbie Behling, Social Studies Education Specialist for Region IV Education Service Center: I am truly indebted to you for giving me the opportunity to be a regular part of the Region IV Social Studies Conference. At this conference, I was able to share my skits with other history teachers, laying the groundwork for this study to be possible. In addition, you have provided ongoing friendship, support, and advice over the years that has helped me to become an even more prepared and versatile teacher. You are so appreciated!

To Benjamin Bannon: Thank you for the friendship and encouragement you have given to me. I appreciate the times you let me bounce ideas off of you about my dissertation; you lent a listening ear, and adeptly tailored your suggestions to my vision. Also, importantly, you never failed to put a smile on my face or make me laugh. You are the best friend anyone could hope to have.

To Dr. Andrew Joseph Pegoda: I admire your utter willingness to speak the truth and to force people to challenge their old "status quo" ways of thinking. If we could clone you, the world would be better off for it. The students who end up in your courses are very fortunate, indeed. Thank you for the friendship and encouragement you provided to me throughout the research process…and for simply being you!

To the teachers who participated in this study: It is my hope that your valuable insights may help guide public education onto a better path. Thank you for being my partners in using Saeed's skits as one tool in creating history classrooms that are more socially just. I love you both!

To Becky Perez: You are utterly indispensable to the Curriculum & Instruction Department. Thank you for all the times you have helped me over the past 10 years…the list is probably a mile long. You are beloved and appreciated!

To Lauren, Pete, Sara, Laila, and Kamila, and Annalise: I cannot imagine my life without you all in it. I hope you know how much I love you! I wish for you to follow your dreams and venture as far as you can in education. I want you to pursue careers that make you happy!

To Raff Saeed: I love you so much. I always tease you, "I'll never give you away," and you can rest assured I will not! With true love, everything else is just better. I cannot wait to see you succeed on your own doctoral journey, which you are about to undertake. I am so proud to call you my husband!

Last, but definitely not least, to my students, past, present, and future: I am honored to have been/to be your teacher. Thank you for all the gleeful days of joy, laughter, and learning…and for making my skits come alive, both now and in years to come. I love you all very much!

I believe that implementing skits in my classroom is an act of love--or, as Paolo Freire so beautifully described it, an act of "radical love" that helps me fulfill my destiny as a teacher perpetually on a quest for social justice… --Sheryl Raffat Saeed

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Abstract

Background: A plethora of research exists to support arts integration, such as Saeed's skits. However, public school teachers who desire to implement activities like Saeed's skits face an ever-increasing loss of autonomy and pressure to conform. Some teachers find ways to continue teaching in ways that they feel are effective for their own classrooms. **Purpose:** The researcher, an author of numerous content-rich, humor-infused history skits ("Saeed's skits"), sought to illuminate teacher perceptions about their social justice impact (student engagement and sense of community) in American History classrooms. **Methods:** The researcher utilized narrative self-inquiry as well as narrative and focus group interviews with two teacher participants who had utilized Saeed's skits in their classrooms. All interviews were transcribed, then narratives (stories) were created for each participant. The stories facilitated the data analysis (coding) process. A flexible coding scheme was used to isolate recurring themes in the narratives for analysis. **Results:** The researcher and two teacher participants shared many similarities in background and preferred teaching strategies. All participants reported perceptions of Saeed's skits as having increased the social justice climate in their history classrooms. Emergent themes included the increasing loss of teacher autonomy (focus on testing, district-mandated materials, micromanagement, and a need for coping/system-bucking behaviors) and the influence of teacher mentoring upon feelings about arts integration, including Saeed's skits. **Conclusion:** The researcher and both teacher participants provided evidence that Saeed's skits were effective in promoting social justice in history classrooms. Concurrently, all three reported increasing district encroachment upon teacher autonomy and had devised many short-

term coping behaviors as they navigated ways to continue using activities of their own choosing. Ideas were generated for possible long-term social action on this problem.

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Chapter I

"Emotion is the glue that makes history stick." –James Loewen

Introduction

"Legendary character Mary Poppins famously said, 'In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You first find the fun, and SNAP! The job's a game.' I completely agree with Mary! My philosophy of teaching has always been 'Learning should be fun.' Staying true to my philosophy, I developed my content-rich history skits starting in 2008, which incorporate essential content in creative and interesting ways via dialogue in easy-to-use classroom skits. I soon noticed that incorporating my skits helped me to meet many social justice-oriented goals in my classroom in terms of providing equitable opportunities to all students to access the content" (Saeed, 2016, page 1). A social justice-oriented classroom is one where an attempt is made at providing an equitable learning environment for all students in the classroom (Howard, 2007). An equitable learning environment includes providing opportunities for students to venture beyond the textbook and other traditional learning and teaching methods, and into a realm where all students feel safe, meaningful context is provided, and multiple perspectives are explored (Cardenuto, 2014).

Given the changing demographics and ever-shifting cultural realities of today's students, educators need to constantly stay one step ahead in the quest to create an equitable learning environment (Saeed, 2016). Skits can help reach reluctant students and marginalized student populations (Robinson, 2013; Dwyer, 2011; Rabkin & Redmond, 2004; Mason, Steedly, & Thormann, 2005; Klein, 2010; Ingram & Seashore, 2003; Nolan & Patterson, 2000). Robinson (2013) reported that arts integration such as

skits may help teach Common Core standards to disadvantaged student populations, including "economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students with disabilities." Dwyer found that "visual arts and theatre skills" resulted in improved reading skills for "economically disadvantaged students and English learners" (as cited in McCarty & Delk, 2012). Ingram & Seashore (2003) noted that arts integration appeared to have an even more powerful effect on students who were economically disadvantaged than on other types of learners. Skits may help a wide range of students, fostering content retention, reading ability, and a lifetime love of learning (Brock, 2011; Podlozny, 2000; Clapper, 2010; Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskava, & Hardiman, 2011). For instance, Brock (2011) found that the integration of theater arts into the classroom seemed to not only foster student engagement in the short term, but a love of learning for a lifetime. Podlozny's (2000) meta-analysis of research on theater arts integration found that a positive correlation existed between classroom drama and comprehension test scores. Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskava, and Hardiman (2011) and Clapper (2010) concluded that arts integration seemed to improve long-term understanding and retention of content.

Due to its inherently story-rich nature, social studies (in this case, American History) is a perfect venue for using skits to help students make curricular connections (Manifold, 1995). By using skits as a teaching and learning strategy, the many facets of a complex historical content can be easily visualized and understood (Deasy, 2002; Graves, 2008). Ruppert (2006) found that arts integration contributed to increased student motivation and a positive school climate. Baker (2013), Brock (2011), and Tollafield (2011) had similar findings, asserting that arts integration not only helped to foster cognitive development within special populations, but also had a positive effect upon

students' school experiences.

Statement of the Problem

American History classrooms naturally lend themselves to opportunities for role-play and dialogue as learning tools; unfortunately, there is a considerable lack of readily usable, pertinent, and student-friendly skits for history educators. As a group, essentialist (or conservative) teachers and professors, who as a group tend to prefer more traditional teaching methods, are more inclined to see a teacher's role as being a transmitter of information, morals, values, and discipline; students attend school to be trained in the basics (Educational Philosophies Definitions and Comparison Chart, 2016; Kohn, 1999). School administrators often have a singular focus on standardized testing outcomes, and thus many teachers may be fearful to veer away from a prescribed curriculum (Arts Education Partnership, 2009; Steinbach, 2013). Street (2015) notes the words of Henry Giroux, explaining, teachers "are prevented from taking risks and designing their own lessons as the pressure to produce high test scores produces highly scripted and regimented" curricula (para. 1). Nonetheless, even in the face of these obstacles, it is the teacher's duty to make every effort to teach how students learn. For example, Oreck (as cited in Dickinson, 1997) acknowledged the vast research showing that the benefits of integration were transferable to other content areas, but noted that "this transfer cannot occur unless teachers change their classroom's structure—their use of time, grouping, instructional strategies, active and participatory learning for all kids—to allow those skills and abilities to come out and be used" (para. 21).

In today's society and within our all-inclusive public schools and universities, the reality is that students come from a plethora of backgrounds and social contexts,

necessitating educators to be willing to try new teaching strategies in an effort to reach all students (Saravia-Shore, 2008). As Vygotsky showed (as cited in Kincheloe, 2005), when a student enters school with little to no exposure to the social context of academia, a traditional teaching and learning approach may not be effective. Facilitating accessibility of often difficult-to-understand content so that all students may understand and apply it towards becoming more conscious human beings and community members—not to pass a standardized test—is a social justice goal (Freire, as cited in Kincheloe, 2005).

Often, glaringly absent are skits and other lesson components that integrate popular culture and/or humor in ways that will be truly engaging for today's youth and foster critical thinking skills (White & Walker, 2008). Increasing accessibility of the content by overcoming, as bell hooks described, the "narrow boundaries that shape the way knowledge is produced and transmitted in the classroom" is aligned with a social justice vision (as cited in Kincheloe, 2005, p. 84). For example, through skits, students can see a story played out before their eyes, and to consider perspectives and emotional elements that with a dry textbook reading may have been completely overlooked (Catterall, 2002). Critical pedagogy, a central component of my doctoral program, is a method of teaching and learning focused on facilitating students in overcoming the amorphous forces that maintain the social hierarchy status quo (Kincheloe, 2005). Kincheloe describes the teachings of Freire, who believed that "the oppressed have been so inundated by the ideologies of their oppressors that they have come to see the world and themselves through their oppressors' eyes" (pp. 72-73). Therefore, a goal of good teaching would be to facilitate students in seeing themselves and the world from "a new

vantage point" (p. 73).

Purpose of the Study

This study addresses a need for more effective and engaging teaching and learning materials in American History classes to promote social justice. While research exemplifies that the arts, including skits, contribute to fostering student success in the classroom (Robinson, 2013; Catterall, 2002; Brock, 2011; McFadden, 2012; Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskava, & Hardiman, 2011; Colley, 2012), school administrators and politicians have not necessarily paid much attention (Dunn, 2013; Mason, et al, 2008; Americans for the Arts, 2009). However, because public schools exist to serve their communities' children and parents (Kozol, 1991), it should warrant administrators to at least take a look at how meaningful arts integration might help their students academically and otherwise (Kozol, 2005). Based on my own experience, students seem much more eager as a group to embrace the idea of arts (Baker, 2013; Brock, 2011; Tollafield, 2011; Ruppert, 2006)—specifically, the incorporation of Saeed's unique, creative, humorous, and content-rich learning skits into American History classrooms. Therefore, this research provides a path that may serve to further confirm the efficacy of arts integration strategies, such as Saeed's skits, by demonstrating their value in advancing the goal of social justice in terms of student engagement and sense of community. Additionally, it may both educate administrators, politicians, and even reluctant teachers and ease their fears, sparking changes in the trends of over-testing, micromanagement, and conformity that has taken hold throughout the sphere of public education (Steinbach, 2013; Street, 2015; Arts Education Partnership, 2009; Brady, 2016; Ravitch, 2014; Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, & Dean, 2003).

Significance of the Study

By using skits to teach history, I am attempting to create a critical pedagogical sense of justice and equity in my classroom that can ripple out into the universe. I feel this way because I agree with famous astrophysicist, Dr. Neil DeGrasse Tyson's statement that, "We are all connected . . . to each other, biologically . . . to the earth, chemically . . . to the rest of the universe, atomically" (BoreMeScience, 2016). Also, I take into consideration the quantum physics concept of non-locality, which "suggests that the universe is in fact profoundly different from our habitual understanding of it, and that the 'separate' parts of the universe are actually potentially connected in an intimate and immediate way" (Mastin, 2009). Maxine Greene (2008) eloquently stated in regards to the arts' potential to facilitate realization of a common humanity:

> Again, speaking of engagement, I think of the way we are in the world, acting upon it and being acted upon, always open to possibilities, to pathways seen and unseen. We are entangled with one another and, in our doing and undergoing with the world around. To grasp that, to realize that standing—unengaged—bleakly on a beach saying "I" is a denial of our humanity and of the mysterious potential in the arts. (p. 20)

Consequently, I am determined that my classroom will not be a place where students will sit and memorize random facts without concern for connection or relevance. Instead, they will be empowered to understand historical context for events which can, as Kincheloe (2011) describes, transformatively acknowledge "the existence of multiple perspectives" which is so crucial in combating the status quo and developing critical thinking skills (p. 409). "Critical educators cannot just work to change the social order

without helping to educate a knowledgeable and skillful group of students" (p. 21).

I wholeheartedly reject the notion of mandating teachers to follow a pre-packaged, scripted, and/or narrowed curriculum; that is not the role of a real teacher, and does not fit into a social justice worldview (Walker, 2014). Instead, I desire to engage in "educational adventurism" which implies a power to go where a lesson naturally flows, depending upon the differing experiences and perspectives of the students in each classroom (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 4). Without students being able to learn the content in a meaningful way, there can be no adventure. In a very real sense, skits allow me and the students to "pack" for an exciting trip, which happens in the classroom after they have arrived at their destination, or achieved understanding of an event and its many layers (Graves, 2008; Catterall, 2002). That is when the real magic is possible—when students can grasp the emotions and motivations behind an event, ask meaningful questions, form their own opinions, understand how the event connects to them personally, and come to their own conclusions about it (Kincheloe, 2005; Eynde & Turner, 2006, VanSledright, 2008).

As a teacher, I have seen that students need to be able to deeply understand the content before they can think critically on an issue (Willingham, 2007). Students using traditional methods (such as textbooks) often fail to meaningfully learn the content because it is inaccessible to many, and the use of alternative texts may help schooling as a whole to be significantly more exciting (Loewen, 2016; White, 2015). Students from traditionally marginalized groups, such as those characterized as coming from a lower socioeconomic status (low-SES), English as a Second Language or English Language Learners (ESL/ELL), and those with non-formally educated parents, have often been

treated by the system as though they are not capable of learning. Nothing is farther from the truth (Kincheloe, 2005). These students can learn, but may not be able to learn easily with the tools traditionally used and promoted by the majority group, such as textbooks. McLaren (2014) notes Antonio Gramsci's description of schools as "a government-coercive apparatus and an apparatus of political and cultural hegemony that continually needs to be renewed in order to secure the assent of the dominant group's agenda" (pp. 245-6). This reality makes it incumbent upon teachers to consciously implement strategies that will not only help students think for themselves and become active citizens in a democratic society, but to purposely challenge the status quo.

Friere (1970) felt that the educational process in general has become misguided, and suffers from "narration sickness" as teachers are relegated to mere narrators who attempt to fill empty vessels (student brains) with knowledge sanctioned by the "dominant minority." This "banking concept" of education is devoid of "creativity, transformation, and knowledge," since students passively receive "deposits" made by the teacher. Friere felt that this banking concept was dehumanizing, and even "necrophilic," and "served the interests of the oppressors" by propagating ignorance and preventing the development of "critical consciousness" (pp. 71-77). Kincheloe (2005) noted, "Schooling is often used by dominant interests to validate their own privilege while certifying the inferiority of students marginalized by social and economic factors" (p. 71). Positivism is an "emphasis upon prediction and control" through the use of scientific data and statistics (p.79). Positivistic policies are evident in the ubiquitous over-testing that is occurring in public school districts (Brady, 2016; Ravitch, 2014). Further, many of the strategies that are commonly used to prepare students for standardized multiple-choice

exams are traditional in nature and not particularly effective in helping foster meaningful learning in a diverse student body (Kincheloe, 2005; Zhao & Hoge, 2005; Loewen, 2007, 2016). Giroux (2011) felt that positivistic policies like these help to maintain the current social class hierarchy.

Students need help in "meaning-making," or understanding context and relevance. For example, Kincheloe (2001) described Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Theory, in which students' past "social context" deeply affects their learning potential. Because of these students' limited exposure to various cultural elements, especially in academia, they may encounter significant academic struggles that have absolutely nothing to do with their "innate cognitive ability" (p. 67). Once students understand the content and make meaning of it, there is no reason for them to fail in school. The research shows that the arts can help students make meaning out of academic content (Catterall, 2002; Graves, 2008).

Critical pedagogist bell hooks (1994) theorized that students are more than capable of breaking through ideological barriers that have prevented them from meaningful understanding, but to help facilitate this, teachers must eschew the worldviews that typically keep educators bound to teaching in the same old ineffective ways. She encouraged teachers to find new ways to teach, such as arts integration (including Saeed's skits), that transform consciousness and foster an atmosphere of free and open expression. In my experience, students' understanding of the content is profoundly increased by skits (Deasy, 2002; Podlozny, 2000; Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskava, & Hardiman, 2011; Clapper, 2010; Walker, Tabone, & Weltsek, 2011; Catterall, 2002; Graves, 2008), and this increased understanding leads to more

sophisticated discussions in which every student in the classroom then has something to contribute. Endacott (2005) identifies context, and the meaningful connections it helps to provide students, as necessary groundwork for any fruitful discussions, activities, and assignments that follow.

Structure of the Study

Chapter II contains a review of the literature. It begins with a brief overview of the study's overriding theoretical framework, the progressive educational philosophy. Current problems in social studies education are outlined, including administrator attitudes, student unpreparedness for secondary social studies, teacher and student apathy, overuse of traditional methods (such as textbooks), micromanagement of teachers, influence of politics on curriculum materials with which to teach and learn, and the use of ineffective teaching materials and strategies—all of which have a negative impact on arts integration in public schools. A wide scope of research is presented showing myriad benefits of arts integration, including skits. These benefits include many layers of student engagement and sense of community, including increased enjoyment and motivation, love of education, content retention, inclusion, cultural awareness, multiple perspectives, interpersonal skills, and social consciousness. This review also provides the justification for the incorporation of humor mixed with factual content as an effective teaching device.

In Chapter III, the research methods and procedures are described. This study borrowed from the narrative approach, which has been used successfully by Clandinin and Connelly (1990, 2000), Clandinin, Huber, J., Huber, M., et. al (1986), and Craig (2007) and advocated by Phillion (2002), Cavendish (2011), Creswell (2003, 2007, 2012), Polkinghorne (1995), Czarniawska (2004), and others. This narrative inquiry

included an autobiographical analysis of the researcher and interviews of two teacher participants, as well as a focus group session. Interviews were transcribed, and stories were then generated which facilitated meaning-making of the interview content; it is from those stories that themes were extracted for analysis (Creswell, 2007). A basic coding strategy taken from Miles and Huberman (1994) and Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994) was implemented.

Chapter IV presents the findings of this narrative inquiry. It begins with my own detailed researcher's personal narrative, starting with my childhood influences and their impact on my development into a history teacher and author of skits for the classroom. Through this narrative self-inquiry, I detailed my background, experiences of implementing skits in the classroom, and more. Also shared were some of my personal views regarding the current state of education as well as my beliefs on arts integration and social justice. Then, the findings delve into the stories of my two teacher participants, which were created based upon the narrative interviews and subsequent data analysis, including a thorough member-checking process. Major themes that emerged from their stories are described, and discussed in terms of what these themes might mean in relation to social justice and the use of skits in history classrooms.

Chapter V briefly discusses the manifest themes that resulted from the analysis of these narratives and conclusions drawn, and how they relate back to the research question and social justice goals. In addition, several latent themes that emerged during the data analysis are described. These latent themes are pertinent to teachers' abilities to pursue arts integration, such as Saeed's skits, in their classrooms. A review is presented as to why this research is important to the vision of promoting arts integration such as skits.

Finally, suggestions are made regarding possible future research that might be conducted related to this study.

Research Question

The research question was designed to help elicit teacher participants' perceptions regarding the implementation of a progressive/arts integration strategy, Saeed's skits, in their history classrooms. Specifically, it was designed to gather information related to how the use of Saeed's skits helped to foster a social justice-oriented environment in terms of student engagement and sense of community. Teacher participants' perceptions regarding how Saeed's skits compared with other progressive/student-centered, as well as more traditional types of activities, were also addressed.

1. What are teacher perceptions of Saeed's skits in terms of social justice themes (progressive in nature [i.e., non-traditional], and fostering student engagement and sense of community)?

Definitions

For the purposes of this research, "traditional" instructional strategies refer to those essentialist activities that teachers have relied upon for decades or even centuries, such as those activities based upon rote memorization, mindless copying of material, lecture, worksheets, fill-in-the-blank activities (such as "cloze" notes), and others, as well as having teacher at the center of instruction (i.e., teacher-centered). For example, the educational philosophy of essentialism is based on traditional or conservative ideas about schooling. Essentialism maintains that school is a place to train and discipline students so that they become productive members of society. It is not seen as appropriate for school to "set or influence policies." Under essentialism, teachers are seen as the

transmitters of knowledge, and students are there to be trained. “Essential knowledge and skills and academic rigor” and “hard work, respect for authority, and discipline” are valued (Cohen, 1999).

“Student-centered” or “progressive” instruction refers to a philosophy in which the spotlight is more on students than the teacher, and/or activities in which students have more control than in more traditional activities. As Massouleh and Jooneghani (2012) state, “student-centered philosophies are less authoritarian, less concerned with the past and training the mind, and more focused on individual needs, contemporary relevance, and preparing students for a changing future” (p. 51). Student-centered activities fall under a progressive umbrella, as the “teacher's role is shifted from a mere disseminator to an active facilitator” (p. 51). Unlike traditional methods, which focus on the past, “training the mind,” and “preserving and transmitting the core culture,” one of the functions of student-centered activities would be to allow students more participation in classroom decision-making, to realize their uniqueness, and to instill a sense of school-student cooperation to make society better (p. 51).

“Skits” are very brief plays with few characters; according to Dictionary.com (2016), “a short theatrical sketch or act, usually comical.” Saeed’s skits are brief (usually no more than 1-4 pages total), and easily read aloud in a reader’s theater-style format, meaning that they do not have to be memorized. The skits are content-rich, and contain essential history content that the students need to know to be successful in the course. In addition, Saeed’s skits almost always contain elements of humor and/or snippets of popular culture to generate student interest. Skits, which fall under the category of “arts integration,” would fall at the extreme progressive end of the educational philosophy

spectrum.

For the purposes of this research, texts use the working definition of "social justice" currently used by respected social education expert, Dr. Cameron White: a goal of "addressing economic, social, political, environmental and equity issues in education in a local to global context connected to ethnicity, race, socio-economics, gender, age, ability, choice, and culture leading to critical consciousness and civic engagement" (C.S. White, personal communication, December 2, 2016). For the purposes of this study, classroom strategies that foster social justice have the following attributes: progressive in nature (i.e., non-traditional) and fostering student engagement and sense of community.

This study uses Diaz, Donovan and Pascale's (2006) definition of arts integration: "Arts integration is the investigation of curricular content through artistic explorations. In this process, the arts provide an avenue for rigorous investigation, representation, expression, and reflection of both curricular content and the art form itself" (*Integrated teaching*, pp. 4-5). Further, "Arts integration is instruction that blends content and skills from one arts discipline—music, visual arts, dance, and theater—with another arts discipline or academic subject" (Chicago Guide for Teaching and Learning in the Arts, 2017). Saeed's skits are an example of an arts integration tool, and fall on the extremely progressive end of the educational philosophy spectrum.

This study uses Great Schools Partnership's definition of "student engagement": "student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education" (Great Schools Partnership, 2017). The latter part of the definition related to "motivation (students) have

to learn and progress in their education" is seen as a general love of education and lifelong learning. In this research, the associated elements of content retention, memory, and comprehension are considered components of student engagement.

For the purposes of this study, "sense of community" is defined as including the following dimensions: safety and sense of belonging, considering the multiple intelligences, ensuring inclusion & accessibility of content for all student sub-populations, providing exposure to multiple perspectives, nurturing interpersonal skills, and promoting cultural awareness, social consciousness, and relevance/real-world connections. In addition, "sense of community" includes providing opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration between/among teachers as well as the personal experience of the individual teacher.

Limitations of the Study

This research was limited to teacher perceptions of social justice in conjunction with the incorporation of skits in their American History classrooms; it was not intended to draw specific conclusions regarding student grading or testing outcomes. Due to the scope of this research, which was an exploratory study, the focus was on interviewing teachers to ascertain their perceptions and experiences, not on collecting and comparing numerical student data. Students were indirectly involved in this research insofar as they were an integral part of the classroom environment which was a focus of the teacher interviews. In addition, this research is also limited by the specific type of skits that were the focus of the study. Saeed's skits are a pre-prepared, reader's theater-type of strategy; as such, students were not creators of the script, but were creators of the performance. Student creation of original scripts may be a logical next step of the

process of integrating skits as a regular part of a classroom learning environment, but as this was an exploratory study, it is limited only to the use of those skits written by the researcher.

For some, this inquiry may seem biased in that it examined the impact of implementing skits written by the researcher, and further, that the researcher's experiences with integrating the skits into instruction were explored in conjunction with those of the participating teachers. It should be noted, however, that these aspects were shared by the researcher with full transparency to counter any apparent bias. Furthermore, the researcher's personal experiences and comments were reflected upon and critically analyzed alongside those of the other teacher participants. This is in keeping with narrative inquiry methods in which researchers live and work alongside their participants throughout the research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), drawing close so that they may better understand the intentionality and purpose in participants' actions.

Conclusion

Although limitations to this research are evident, so too is the significance, which bears repeating. The significance of this research lies in its contributions that are personal, practical, and professional. For the researcher and author of Saeed's skits, this study provided feedback as to the effectiveness of utilizing Saeed's skits in the classroom. Similarly, in regards to teacher practice, findings provided insights into the ways teachers employ arts-integration strategies in their classrooms. Finally, on the broader professional education landscape, findings gave insights into the effectiveness of such techniques in teaching history objectives, potentially providing information for decision-making processes of schools, districts, state and national education agencies,

and policy makers at all levels of public education.

Chapter II

"The live creature demands order in his living,

but he also demands novelty." –John Dewey

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This research study sought to illuminate teacher perceptions related to the incorporation of skits into American History classrooms and how this related to social justice. Skits as a teaching and learning strategy honor the constructivist/progressive education paradigm, which is generally at odds with a traditional educational paradigm. For example, under a constructivist/progressive paradigm, teachers are viewed as facilitators who promote student thinking. Quality, or depth, of learning is more important than learning numerous random facts. The integration of various subjects is valued because it enables students to make meaningful connections among them. Constructivists /progressivists view human intelligence as varied; therefore, individual students may have different learning goals rather than being held to the exact same standard. In addition, the constructivist/progressive model encourages critical thinking and questioning, social interaction, fun and engagement, intrinsic motivation, love of learning, a sense of community and collaboration, inclusion and appreciation for diversity, democracy, and social justice. Lastly, and very significantly for the goals of this research, arts intelligence is valued, encouraged, and acknowledged (Kohn, 2008).

John Dewey (1897) was a proponent of progressive education; he pointed out that children's social experiences should be the central reference point for learning, and help them make meaning and realize how what they are learning connects them to civilization

at large. Within the progressive educational paradigm, student-centered and arts integration approaches such as skits fall at the most progressive end of the spectrum (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). However, the arts are uniquely powerful in their ability to

> engage students in learning through observing, listening, and moving and offer learners various ways to acquire information and act on it to build understanding . . . they also offer a natural way to differentiate instruction . . . and provide an authentic context. (Silverstein & Layne, 2010, p. 5)

Skits help students understand multiple facets of complex historical situations by "concisely revealing," for example,

> significant aspects of the often convoluted topic of conflict and war, while illuminating the hidden underlying motivations and perspectives of major players. Students are empowered to make sense of historical facts as a chain of cause and effect, because they are learned within the context of a compelling story. Moreover, students are facilitated in analogizing the actions of historical figures to common human behavior that could be found in any setting...Skits can also spark a sense of wonder regarding what these events may portend for the future. (Saeed, 2016, p. 1-2)

Furthermore, they encourage questioning and discussion that is integral to building community and democracy.

General Benefits of Arts Integration, Including Skits

Integration of theater arts “can play a powerful role…[in being] an important tool to the non-arts teacher” (Saraniero, 2017, para. 9). Further, educators who display “willingness to place drama at the service of other subjects in the curriculum” may be

pleasantly surprised at its effectiveness as a "learning medium" (O'Farrell, 1998, para. 13). He explained,

> Teachers who have become profoundly dissatisfied with the paucity of aim and content in their lessons have begun to see a way forward in the use of drama as a means of understanding academic subject areas . . . Teachers find it possible to identify this learning, and see its value, so that the idea of drama as a method—a tool in the teaching of cognitive skills—is gaining acceptance. (para. 13)

According to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, there are "six major types of benefits associated with study of the arts and student achievement: reading and language skills, mathematics skills, thinking skills, social skills, motivation to learn, and positive school environment" (Ruppert, 2006, p. 10).

Smith (2009) exemplified how arts integration is positively linked to all our nation's stated goals for student success, such as: academic achievement, social and emotional development, civic engagement, and equitable opportunity. Specific academic areas in which arts integration is linked to gains are "math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skill" (para. 2). Furthermore, the arts have the side benefit of helping to improve "concentration, motivation, teamwork, and confidence" (para. 2).

Although the research indicates that the arts, including skits, can serve as effective instructional tools, increasing micromanagement of teachers is often preventing its use. Dickinson (1997) quoted Dr. Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, who made the following statement:

> The arts are essential parts of the human experience; they are not a frill. We recommend that all students study the arts to discover how human beings

> communicate not only with words, but through music, dance, and the visual arts. During our visits (to schools) we found the arts to be shamefully neglected. Courses in the arts were the last to come and the first to go. (para. 2)

Furthermore, teachers who would like to integrate the arts into their core-area classrooms are being hindered in doing so. Given the state of education today, there are increasing mandates from politicians and school administrators regarding how and what teachers are supposed to teach and a seemingly myopic focus on standardized testing. Administrators' pronouncements make this painfully clear, and consequently teachers are often fearful to "stick out" by doing things differently than their colleagues and/or veering away from prescribed curricula and district scopes & sequences. Furthermore, curricula are getting narrower to make more room for test preparation (David, 2011; Walker, 2012).

There is every reason to believe that integrating arts, such as skits, will not only help to create an ideal, progressive, student-centered learning environment, but can allow all students to access the content, foster collaboration with other subject disciplines, and promote positive feelings towards teaching and learning. Indeed, there are other forms of popular media that already illustrate how effective arts integration can be in teaching to a wide variety of learners. As Dickinson (1997) simply but eloquently stated, in public schools it has often been a

> struggle to have the arts taken seriously . . . Our students deserve and need the arts. Research is consistent in their findings as to the benefits of the arts. [We need to] make this research visible and accessible to those who are committed to providing arts education in our public schools and to those who are still skeptical about the role of the arts as basic to every child's education. (p. 1-2)

To serve as a starting-off point, some key aspects of arts integration-related research are examined to illustrate why it needs to be given more consideration as an instructional strategy.

Problems in Social Studies Education

School administrators and the arts. Appel (2006) promoted the value of arts integration by providing an overview of research to school administrators, and suggested that teachers would need training to make it work. Although there are schools and classrooms across the nation where arts integration is regularly used, the reality across the nation is often that administrators and teachers have other priorities. As Rabkin and Redmond (2004) noted, school administrators frequently let "the arts . . . survive at the margins of education as curriculum enrichments, rewards to good students, or electives for the talented" rather than a strategy that is aimed at all students (p. 60). Administrators tend to narrowly follow edicts from upper administration to the detriment of creativity and autonomy, and teachers may perceive that they will look down on these with disdain. Teachers, as a group, seem fearful of going on a tangent away from the prescribed curriculum standards (Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, & Dean, 2003). As one blogger so aptly put it,

> I used to be able to close my (door) and teach the way I knew was right. Now I have groups coming in my room unannounced checking my objectives that must be posted on the wall, asking my students what the objective is, asking them to explain the objective, making sure I am teaching that objective, and looking for evidence that my students are learning the objective. My room is a revolving door of people from the state, superintendent's office, my principal and assistant

> principal, and cohorts of my peers from my building…I would not wish this misery on anyone. (Ravitch Blog, 2016)

The American Federation of Teachers (Nelson, 2013) suggested that incessant testing causes a devastating loss of instructional time in school districts across the nation; they recommended that total time devoted to testing needed to be cut at least in half. Non-tested subjects would reap benefits as well, as their lost time would be restored. The resulting significant saving of funds could then be devoted to instructional materials, "interventions, technology, better (quality) tests . . . staff development, or . . . other purpose" (p. 26). As White and Walker (2008) noted regarding the current test-driven educational system, "There is more concern over what to teach, rather than how or why. . . Teaching and learning can be more effective if students become emotionally connected with the information" (p. 17). Craig (2009) described classrooms as places that have become "increasingly disputed" due to guidance by "official documents and administrative oversight" (p. 1034). Furthermore, curricula seem to be narrowing and some subjects relegated to the back burner as administrators try to make more time for tested subjects (Shavelson, et al, 2010).

Teachers may feel pressure from administrators to strictly adhere to district-mandated curricula, or write lesson plans as a group, often discouraging them from arts integration (Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, & Dean, 2003; RavitchBlog, 2016). Once people step into the world of administration, their "worldview changes. [They] think of the campus as a whole, and [they are] not so focused on one department" (Dunn, 2013). They may feel pressure to implement the desired programs being touted by those in upper administration. Moreover, their focus on standardized test scores cannot be overlooked;

many principals may simply prefer not to take a gamble in their attempt to institute a curriculum that will net the desired results.

The *21st Century Principal* (2015), an online blog for administrators, revealed that many school principals like the idea of a standardized testing system, because it gives them a tool with which to make quick and easy judgement calls about the competence of students and teachers. In addition, they do not mind themselves and their schools being judged, since they receive validation when scores go their way. When scores fail to read expectations, students and teachers can become scapegoats. It was also intimated that a myopic focus on testing data can be an excuse not to act in more meaningful or difficult ways that might be more conducive to social justice aims.

One common strategy in widespread, current use is to have teachers "group plan" to standardize how things are done across classrooms. This reality may make the implementation of arts even more difficult and unlikely. As teacher "redpony" (2012) commented on EdWeek's Blog, *Teacher in a Strange Land*:

> We have to script our lessons . . . with our team during our collaboration time which is 45 minutes every day. We have to write what the teacher says, what the students will say and do, write down where they'll have trouble, and do some sort of assessment every day . . . It is freakin' ridiculous and such a waste of time. It takes us over an hour to do each lesson so there is no time to find new materials or create anything new. Everyone teaching the same subject must do the exact same lesson so we can't try anything new to see if it works better . . . We are being treated like children, not professionals. I used to love my job –now I dread getting out of bed every morning.

Many teachers have different reasons altogether for shying away from the arts; they are afraid to venture out of their comfort zone and to try activities that integrate the arts in their classrooms. These teachers resist suggestions to attempt arts integration in their classrooms (Hirsch, 2016).

Administrators may fail to advocate for arts integration due to several factors. Firstly, some principals may personally have a positive view of arts integration, but are hesitant to take any action on it because it may be perceived as too unique for their more traditionally-minded communities (Steinbach, 2013). Other administrators simply put arts on the back burner due to the schoolwide emphasis on standardized testing and/or the belief that the accompanying content standards and rigor are positive for school success. In some cases, an administrator's personal beliefs about arts integration can make or break its survival at the school. In addition, according to Arts Education Partnership (2009), "challenges to a school system's overall funding or to that system's ability to achieve narrow metrics such as 'adequate yearly progress' can lead to wide variation in the actual delivery of arts education to students" (p. 2).

Many administrators may also perceive that arts integration would cut unnecessary funds from their school budgets, even though this is not always necessarily the case (Americans for the Arts, 2009). Sloan (2009) described that "administrators bemoan the fact that they can no longer find room in the school day for classes outside of core content areas because so much time must be spent preparing students for standardized state assessments" (para. 2). Also, administrators may not give more credence to arts integration simply due to non-exposure. As Davis (2008) explained, "Theoretical tomes on the arts rarely invade the mainstream reading of principals and

other administrators" (p. 3). Tollafield (2011) argued for skits to keep administrators happy, explaining,

> Teachers hear the term "differentiated instruction" more and more these days, and administrators expect it to be an everyday occurrence. Using drama in conjunction with other strategies is an effective way to utilize various learning styles to help students process content. (p. 175)

Secondary students unprepared for social studies learning. Unfortunately, after the No Child Left Behind Act's (2002) intense focus on standardized testing (which has continued under Obama's Race to the Top), many elementary schools across the nation felt the need to spend much more time on reading and mathematics; social studies got the short shrift (Olwell & Raphael, 2006). In fact, many elementary teachers admitted that they simply do not like social studies and do not want to teach it even if given an opportunity to do so (Passe, 2006). Students were entering middle school woefully lacking history content knowledge, and clearly had no experience reading nonfiction texts (Fensterwald, 2015). These students were almost starting from scratch, and secondary teachers inherited the job of making up for lost opportunities. While some schools made small efforts to incorporate social studies material, other schools simply tried to integrate social studies material into reading passages or mathematics word problems, while still other schools taught no social studies at all. Social studies as a subject in elementary schools has become almost non-existent (Jones, Pang, & Rodriguez, 2001). In some cases, social studies is being absorbed into other classes, in a practice known as "subject integration." As Margit McGuire (2007) notes, "schools and textbook publishers are attempting to 'integrate' social studies into the teaching of

reading…Social studies, however, is more than reading for comprehension" (Abstract). Walker (2014) adds: "Social studies often falls victim to 'subject integration' with reading . . . It doesn't foster a very sophisticated treatment of the subject matter" (para. 26). Because of the continued emphasis on the subjects that are tested, social studies is experiencing a steady decline. Teachers and students increasingly see social studies as a non-necessary, useless, and unenjoyable subject area that has no connection to their lives personally. These views negatively affect the way social studies is taught, if it is taught at all (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Many students may wonder, "Why do we even need to take history?"

Bridging the knowledge gap becomes almost impossible with an unmotivated set of learners (and, sometimes, teachers) who are forced to read from what they consider to be boring textbooks, learn a set of random, unconnected facts, or take notes from PowerPoint presentations (Loewen, 2007). All of this is rather ominous, given the fact that these same students will eventually need to have a deep grasp of historical content to graduate from high school and, perhaps later to pass college classes, since end-of-course exams are included in graduation requirements (Zinth, 2012). To further exemplify this point, Sewall (1998) referred to a 1987 national survey that had been conducted on 17-year-olds; he used the word "shameful" in describing the shocking lack of understanding of American history displayed by the teenagers.

As these teenagers grow into adults, the prognosis does not seem to improve. In 2006, a study assessing Americans' basic knowledge of history was carried out by the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum, and spotlighted by the online science website *Live Science*. The study (a survey) concluded that "more people could name the three

American Idol judges than identify three First Amendment rights" (para. 9). In addition, "only one in four Americans can name more than one of the five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment;" however, more than 50% could name at least two members of the fictional cartoon family known as *The Simpsons* (Live Science Staff, 2006, para. 1).

Problems with textbooks and other traditional learning methods. Contemporary students do not get excited about textbooks or other traditional ways of learning, such as lecture/note-taking, rote memorization, and individual seatwork in a silent environment (North American Montessori Teachers' Association (NAMTA), 2014). Isolated subject areas and non-collaboration among core subjects are also a hallmark of traditional education. Unfortunately, however, textbooks are the teaching tool of choice for the majority of history educators. Loewen (2016) commented that "textbooks dominate history teaching more than any other field" (para. 8), further asserting that among the serious issues relating to textbooks are concerns that students find them boring and that they contain a lot of misinformation. Perhaps because of this, students across the K-12 spectrum characterized social studies courses as the most boring out of all the core classes. As Loewen (2007) noted, "history is the least-liked subject in American high schools" (p. xiii).

Sadly, because of teachers' overuse (or dependence) of textbooks, many students equated learning in social studies with textbook reading, contributing to students' negative feelings about social studies classes. Moreover, because students are uninterested in learning social studies, they often fail to make connections between how historical events in the past relate to their lives today (Sewall, 1988). A study by Zhao and Hoge (2005) showed that many social studies educators not only continue to adhere

to a textbook-heavy teaching strategy, but remain too focused on their state's minimum curriculum requirements. Foster and Padgett (1999) described the overuse of teacher-dominated lecture and rote memorization in history education, even though many creative teaching strategies exist from which teachers may draw in their instruction.

The problem with textbooks goes even deeper. Michael Apple's work (as cited in Kincheloe, 2005) showed how textbook content is tightly controlled by corporations and that over the past several decades, these corporations have been very effective in utilizing textbooks to promote their right-wing agendas. At the same time, a privatization project has been underway, eased along by attacks on public schools (Ravitch, 2014). These agendas are Social Darwinist in nature, emphasizing particular values that benefit the powerful: "the traditional family, free-market economic policy, a narrow view of patriotism, Christianity, and a business needs-driven school curriculum" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 82). This is evident when examining some of the conservative initiatives that have been put in place across the nation.

For example, there is an ongoing nationwide privatization effort to take over public schools (Ravitch, 2014). Now, instead of five years, a school district can be seized by private opportunists after only the second year of what the state is calling failing scores on standardized tests. Online schools and courses are being regulated less, which would portend more competition for public schools. In punitive authoritarian fashion, public schools would be labeled with a letter grade of A through F based upon standardized test scores (Tanner, 2016). Unbeknownst to many was a carefully-crafted plan to create alarm throughout the public about the supposedly failing schools in their communities. These examples represent just the tip of the iceberg.

In Texas, similar such items on the conservative agenda appear to be driven by Texans for Education Reform, whose goals are to underpin the success of the entrepreneurial community, not Texas public school students (Fulton, 2015). Standardized tests seem to be a major tool conservatives are using to justify corporate takeovers of public education (Brady, 2016; Ravitch, 2014). In 2015, Texas State Teachers Association President Noel Candelaria declared that the Republican-dominated Texas Legislature had failed to adequately fund public schools and that legislators "[were] eager to declare schools a failure based on standardized test scores;" furthermore, state leaders' agendas did nothing to reverse this (Fulton, 2015, para. 9).

Diane Ravitch tried to warn the nation about the corporate reform/privatization movement in her work *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (2014). Those whose agenda is to privatize public schools appear to be using the strategy of triangulation, or taking a several-pronged approach, in their quest to take over public schools. In conjunction with their legislative agenda of limiting public school funding, they rely upon positivistic, data-driven standardized testing and are currently building up their future voter base by enacting laws that limit voting, ensuring that systems of gerrymandering remain in place throughout the nation (Brennan Center for Justice, 2016; North, 2016).

School curricula are also being infiltrated and adulterated by these right-wing entities. In Texas, for example, many adopted textbooks and curricula propagate false or unprovable notions, such as that Moses (of Bible fame) was an individual "whose principles of laws and government institutions informed the American founding documents, including those of Moses, William Blackstone, John Locke, and Charles de

Montesquieu" (Isensee, 2014, para. 9). Strict party-line voting ensured the passage of many other changes which put forth false or biased information (McKinley, 2010). Textbook content in Texas is laced with euphemistic jargon aligned to right-wing viewpoints, such as "free enterprise" instead of "capitalism" (the latter having been the preference of history experts, but overridden by the Texas State Board of Education). Potentially controversial or uncomfortable issues, such as white supremacy, racism, slavery, or treatment of marginalized groups, are minimized or made vague, while specific references to "American exceptionalism" have been inserted (Joffe, 2015). In addition, the 2012 Texas Republican Party platform included a ban on "critical thinking" in public school classrooms (Texas Republican Party Platform, 2012).

In recent years, more emphasis has been placed on civics, while history content continually gets trimmed. Joffe (2015) stated, "At the core of this debate over 'revisionist' versus 'traditional' history is the question of whether U.S. history curriculum should be about facts or a primer on civic duty and citizenship" (para.15). The purpose of the civics push is to propagate a more positive view of America's past and to, as a majority-conservative school board in Colorado asserted, assure that "materials should promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system, respect for authority and respect for individual rights. Materials should not encourage or condone civil disorder, social strife or disregard of the law" (para. 15).

Partly because of efforts to incorporate more of these civics-based ideas, curriculum content often gets thinned (Shavelson, et al., 2014). Chunks of history are either excised completely from the curriculum or made vague. For example, realities of the institution of slavery are glossed over or not discussed whatsoever in the classroom

(Joffe, 2015). Histories of the political parties are often not mentioned, leaving students to believe that Republicans of the Civil War era are the same as Republicans today (in terms of liberal vs. conservative), even though the history of the parties is much more complicated (Wolchover, 2012). Students may have difficulty meaningfully deciphering the context of American History when integral pieces to the puzzle are missing. For example, Media Matters for America (2016) described a prominent, ostensibly knowledgeable conservative political pundit, Jeffrey Lord, attempting to draw a false connection between the KKK and modern-day Democrats; he was later challenged by *The Daily Show* host, Trevor Noah. The dwindling of the history curriculum is harming students; Professor Ed Hirsch says, "It's been a disaster for social justice." Sadly, schools with higher numbers of impoverished students tend to narrow the curricula more severely (Walker, 2014).

Conservatives across the nation have been making concerted efforts to fill state boards of education with "radical right wingers" who will carry out their goal of "rewriting textbook and educational standards so they are more amenable to the conservative cause" (Marcotte, 2014, p. 2). Unless the teacher is well-versed in the content or informed (or bold enough to venture away from the prescribed curriculum) on these issues, students may never be given other viewpoints to consider other than what textbooks provide. Schug, Western, and Enochs (1997) reviewed research on teachers and textbook use, and found themes among the conclusions pointing to the possibility that teachers who rely almost exclusively on textbooks may include those who are "poorly informed about content and pedagogy" or are "submissive indoctrinators" (para. 9).

Students deserve to be provided a balanced view, but that may not happen if the teacher is not well-versed enough in the content to stray outside of a biased textbook. Loewen (2007) asserted, "If teachers merely rely on their textbooks . . . and try to get students to "learn" them, and if the textbooks are as bad as (I) suggest, then teachers are complicit in miseducating their charges about our past" (p. xv). Donald Macedo described schools as "tools of the status quo" and shows how textbooks can prevent students from understanding and critically examining issues in context and realizing how they and their families are personally affected (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 83). And, Michael Apple warned:

> in the 21st century right-wing elites now possess the hegemonic ability to establish once and for all what constitutes official knowledge via their political economic power. Corporations now firmly control both the media and the production of school textbooks. In this control, they have established a knowledge industry that emphasizes the traditional family, free-market economic policy, a narrow view of patriotism, Christianity, and a business needs-driven school curriculum. (as cited in Kincheloe, 2005, p. 82)

Overall, via textbooks, students may be being indoctrinated with certain ideas that have an end result of keeping non-traditional students (those who are more likely to lack developed critical thinking skills) from rising up, or changing their social reality. (Kincheloe, 2005). Thus, the "age-old conservative belief in the value of social hierarchy" is able to be maintained (p. 81).

Kincheloe (2005) described the work of McLaren in his discussion of the political agendas of many curriculum materials. Much of what is used to teach in the field of

education—even many materials presented as neutral—has a political component that helps fulfill the agenda of the group that is already in power. If the status quo is not being challenged, the materials cannot be truly described as neutral. Therefore, a real teacher needs to be a partner with students in learning to see through the cumulative fog of these various agendas and to become empowered critical thinkers (Kincheloe, 2005). When students can see multiple perspectives and human emotions that skits are able to highlight (Catterall, 2002), students are then able to make informed choices about "beliefs based on the diverse perspectives they confront in school and society" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 11).

Language matters. Reliance on textbooks, which are filled with traditional, academic or otherwise non-stimulating language, can alienate significant numbers of students (Loewen, 2007). In the quest for helping all students to gain access to history content and to participate meaningfully in history class, skits can be very helpful in providing chronology, context, and meaning, illuminating the motivations and points of view of various "actors" (Brophy, McMahon, & Prawat, 1991; Catterall, 2002; Clapper, 2010; Deasy, 2002; Graves, 2008; Podlozny, 2000; Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskava, & Hardiman, 2011; Robinson, 2013). By using a more relaxed, conversational style of language, Dewey showed how barriers of traditional teaching and learning can be eliminated, and all students are given the opportunity to be part of the classroom learning community (as cited in Kincheloe, 2005, p. 33). Vygotsky (as cited in Kincheloe, 2005, p. 69) took this notion a step further, that language is akin to a bridge via which people are able to attain higher thought processes. Language itself can reinforce existing ("traditional") power structures in society, which have served the interests of only a select

few. By revamping teaching methods and incorporating language in a different way, we can literally welcome all students into the learning fold (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 55).

Importance of chronology & context. Brophy, McMahon, & Prawat (1991) demonstrated that students learn history best when it is presented in a chain-of-events format. Historical events presented in the order in which they occurred will logically relay to students the causes and effects of important events. This is in direct contrast to a method of teaching students a list of random facts to memorize, which are not meaningful and are likely to be forgotten. Brophy and Alleman (1993) perfectly encapsulated the common educational worldview that contributes to such an activity being considered by teachers:

> too many curriculum developers and teachers appear to proceed by asking what knowledge, skills, and values are emphasized in the state and district guidelines for the grade level and then covering them, especially those that are likely to be tested . . . There is a general failure to tie things together. Knowledge content becomes fragmented into disconnected bits that can be memorized but not easily learned with understanding of their meaning or appreciation of their potential significance. Skills are taught and practiced in isolation from one another and from the knowledge content, and not as tools for using the knowledge content in authentic life applications. The social studies curriculum becomes a collection of miscellaneous definitions, facts, and generalizations to be memorized for tests, instead of a vehicle for helping students understand and participate effectively in the world. (p. 27)

When teachers do not teach events in their proper chronology, important elements

are often left unexplained completely, and students will have a harder time generating meaningful questions about the events (Brophy, McMahon, & Prawat, 1991). There have been cases in which teachers rely heavily upon what is known as *100 History Facts* (or, an updated version that is making the rounds, *130 History Facts*) to teach content. Using one hundred predetermined "crucial" history facts (based upon what teachers feel students need to know on standardized tests), students are sometimes made to write these statements five times each. It is important to note that these facts are not presented to the student in chronological order or a chain-of-events format; rather, they are listed by topic (Brophy, McMahon, & Prawat, 1991). The list of *100 History Facts* would unlikely be able to help students develop the ability to put themselves figuratively behind the scenes of different events in American History and ascertain the motivations and feelings of various people that took part (Catterall, 2002; Graves, 2008; Freeman & Levstik, 1988). As philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1929/1967) reflected, "Scraps of information" are only useful to the extent that they are "thrown into fresh combinations" (p. 1). State content standards that permeate every aspect of public school teaching and learning are very reminiscent of the *100 History Facts* document. Alfie Kohn (1999) related the views of Linda Darling-Hammond, Professor of Education and President/CEO of the Learning Policy Institute, on these ubiquitous content standards:

> many existing standards documents do not encourage teaching for understanding…They outline hundreds of bits of information for students to acquire at various grade levels in each subject area, creating expectations for content coverage that render impossible the in-depth study students need to understand and apply ideas. (p. 14)

In contrast, using skits to teach about historical events will help students to see the before, during, and after of important historical events, as well as the human emotions behind these events. Students would be, in effect, seeing the story played out before them (Deasy, 2002).

The use of skits to teach the "big picture" of an event or time period has several benefits. Students can more easily see the context around which an event occurred, which will deepen understanding (Graves, 2008). In addition, students are more likely to find commonalities between the human motivations and actions of historical figures and people in their own lives, thus finding meaning and relevance (Eynde & Turner, 2006; Kincheloe, 2005; VanSledright, 2008). Some of the struggles which the students have faced in their own environments will surely mirror choices and dilemmas that were faced by people they are learning about in history class (Catterall, 2002). In fact, without being able to unpack the complex nature of an event or action in history, it can be argued that students may never be able to truly understand. Kincheloe (2005) pointed out that, in fact, "context may be more important than content" (p. 33). In describing the perspective of John Dewey, Kincheloe contended that,

> knowledge could never be viewed outside the context of its relationship to other information. We only have to call to mind (that) what passes in our schools as acquisition of knowledge to understand how it is decontextualized and lacks any meaningful connection to the experience of students. (p. 33)

Even more profoundly, Kincheloe concluded that "an individual is a sophisticated thinker to the degree in which he or she sees an event not as something isolated" (p. 33) but instead, in the profound words of Dewey, "in its connection with the common experience

of mankind" (p. 34).

For far too long, those who pull the curriculum strings had focused on "inculcating a body of 'neutral' facts into teachers' heads", contriving for their own purposes . . . the format of the curriculum, lesson planning, and behavioral objectives" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 35). Donald Macedo (1994) pointed out that educational institutions in the United States tend to buttress the agendas of the dominant group, stymie independent thought, and propagate ignorance. Therefore, schools, media, and other institutions "served to stupidify" people who followed them to the letter, and helped maintain the status quo for those already in power by "fragmenting knowledge and denying contextual understanding" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 35, 85).

In the current educational climate, teachers are constantly reminded, monitored, and even intimidated into following district curriculum scopes and sequences very closely, and there is a lot of pressure not to deviate. David's (2008) article, *What Research Says About Pacing Guides,* gave an overview of some of the research related to these common school district actions, and found that "pacing guides intensify pressure on teachers to cover all the material specified and that teachers attempt to meet this demand in several ways" (para. 5). For example, they spend more time on tested subjects, rely on "teacher-centered lessons that seem more efficient and predictable than student-centered lessons," (para. 6), eliminate lengthy, cognitively challenging activities, which would promote in-depth understanding, read only excerpts rather than whole books, simply drop activities altogether due to lack of time, and more (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; David and Greene, 2007; Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005).

Wills and Sandholtz (2009) demonstrated how standardized testing had detrimental

effects upon teachers' ability to independently decide which teaching and learning activities they felt were best for the students in their own classrooms. They described one qualified social studies teacher that they observed, stating that

> this qualified teacher did not teach social studies in the way she believed would best serve her students' needs and interests…This case study demonstrates how teachers' professional discretion is being minimized in subtle yet consequential ways amid high-stakes testing…Constrained professionalism represents a new situation in which teachers retain autonomy in classroom practices, but their decisions are significantly circumscribed by contextual pressures and time demands that devalue their professional experience, judgment, and expertise. (Abstract)

Dropping of cognitively challenging activities was especially common among teachers with high minority populations. In addition, the use of "pacing guides" did not bode well when districts used them as a "tool to monitor teachers' adherence to a prescribed, centralized curriculum. This monitoring tends to further narrow content and instructional strategies" (David, 2008). Au's (2007) research showed that 75% of a group of similar research studies all came to similar conclusions as all of the above cited researchers. All of these actions are ways that teachers cope with the stress of now-ubiquitous pacing guides (i.e, "curriculum calendars," etc.) and standardized testing.

Finally, David (2008) noted the conclusion of Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, and Dean (2003) that, in contrast to other countries, "in the United States, most (pacing) guides do not address the development of student reasoning and that teachers rarely deviate from the guides" (para. 10). David further intimated that teachers and students

would be better served if pacing guides were created for "curriculum guidance" rather than as "prescriptive pacing" (David, 2008, para. 12).

Therefore, even teachers who are willing to challenge the status quo may have a difficult time doing so. Even in the face of dominant power interests, it is important to facilitate students in rejecting hegemonic attempts to 'dumb down' perspectives. Unless students are empowered in "meaning-making," they may never be able to challenge the status quo (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 36). Meaning-making happens when students can understand context and relevance. Seeing a historical event play out in a classroom skit allows students to survey the context of an event rather than learning facts in isolation. Gullatt (2007) concluded that through arts integration, students are "enabled to construct their own meaning because they are actively involved in learning" (p. 213).

Traditional ways of educating, such as reading and writing, serve to maintain the status quo by giving "advantage to some individuals and groups more than others" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 93). He pointed out that even with the leaps in technology "in computing and communication." (p. 93) the status quo is still being served. Lankshear and Knobel (2007) suggested that "new literacies" are necessitated that open up content and discourse to a wider variety of learners as well as allow free-flowing interaction with texts to promote "diverse meaning-making" (para. 7) as well as "ways of being together in the world" (para. 6).

Reif and Grant (2010) verbalized this need to conjure up completely new strategies to reach all learners, intimating that teachers should not assume that a 'one size fits all' philosophy will suffice:

With multiple preferences for learning and processing information present in our

> classrooms, and the knowledge that our classrooms are comprised of increasing numbers of learners who are from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, it becomes imperative that teachers reconceptualize instructional strategies and practices. It is in this reconceptualization of instruction that the arts hold so much promise. (p. 101)

Arts Integration and Increasing Student Engagement

Student engagement includes "degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education" (Great Schools Partnership, 2017). In this study, student engagement will also include the associated benefit of improved memory or content retention.

McFadden's research (2012) mirrored that of Baker (2013), Brock (2011), and Tollafield (2011), as it exemplified that not only can arts integration help foster cognitive development within special student populations, but students' experiences at school can be positively enhanced as well. Further, McFadden asserted that more than enough research exists to allay the fears of "pessimistic administrators" with regards to integrating the arts as a common practice in the classroom (p. 87). Lastly, Lorimer (2009) argued to principals that increased integration of the arts not only helps to educate the whole child but helps to engage all learners.

Looking forward toward the future, Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga (1999) analyzed longitudinal survey data, and concluded that there are "positive academic developments for children engaged in the arts," and that the "comparative gains for arts-involved youngsters generally become more pronounced over time" (p. 2). These

conclusions also applied to children of low socio-economic status. Cawthon, et al. (2011) found that integration of classroom drama could "shift the learning culture of a classroom, school, and district" and lead to not only increased student engagement, but increased teacher engagement as well (p. 19). They added, "…drama-based instruction leverages the power of imagery, role-play, improvisation, and dialog in ways that connect students to curricular content" (p. 19).

Skits are meaningful to students as evidenced by what they remember long-term, as Robinson and Schur revealed in their 2010 study in which they argue for the value of role-play, stating that, "What students remember about their 8th grade study of American history is the historical simulations and the roles they played in them that stick in their memories" (p. 178). If teachers want to ensure that their students remember them years later, integrating skits in the classroom might help. So, arguably, using skits may increase sentimental value of the classroom experiences, leading to the development of fond memories that endure (Robinson & Schur, 2010).

Furthermore, theater arts showed particular promise in helping students learn social studies concepts, via "brain-based learning" and the inherent nature of theater arts in revealing emotions attached to certain events in our past (Eynde & Turner, 2006). This was confirmed by Catterall's (2002) study, which showed that classroom drama can greatly break down difficult concepts by helping students understand the points of view of characters and the emotional ramifications of the events in which they took part.

Baker (2013) painted a picture of a vital connection between arts integration and the essential cognitive development of children. Baker stated, "Through arts integration, hierarchical implementation of instructional objectives including use of context and

culture can be incorporated across instructional units to promote cognitive variables related to intellectual development" (p. 14). Although Baker noted that quantitative analysis would be indicated in order to determine to what extent cognitive development promotes intellectual growth and intelligence, what is clear is that arts integration promotes greater demonstration of cognition and learning. By providing "context and culture" via arts integration techniques embedded throughout the instructional objectives, students are able to process content more effectively, which may, in turn, contribute to the child's overall intellectual development (p. 13).

What Brock (2011) discovered was perhaps most profound of all:

> Theater Arts integration in curriculum engages students in the learning process and promotes a greater affinity for education. If students are eager to learn, they will pay closer attention to subject matter. Once students are more engaged in school, schools will perform better on academic testing and produce students who have a positive attitude towards education. (p. 4)

Therefore, integrating arts (such as skits) in a classroom might create such an affinity for education that it could have a generalized effect on the student's outlook on lifetime learning. Burstein and Knotts (2010) carried out a study that, comparable to Brock, suggests that arts integration can serve to help get students more deeply engaged with social studies content and create real-world connections showing them how the past connects to their lives today. Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, and McLaughlin's study (as cited in McCarty & Delk, 2012) showed that arts integration strengthened "communication, social interaction, self-confidence, and motivation to learn, contributing to increased academic achievement" (p. 61).

Deasy (2002) concluded that students who participate in classroom skits appear to be "more engaged during dramatizations than when just listening…several key ingredients of story understanding are better conveyed through drama: main idea, character identification, and character motivation. These are essential elements of comprehension" (p. 34). Graves (2008) showed that students who had experienced the use of role-play in the history classroom found the content to be more meaningful and gained a deeper understanding of the material; they were also able to remember the information better long-term. Eisner (1998) also described how students who are heavily involved in the arts perform better on tests, indicating content retention and a better understanding of the material. Colley (2012) found that the use of skits in the classroom may help students remember things better. Berk (2002) described how drama is able to boost student learning, stating: "…a skit or dramatization, especially with student actors, creates a concrete visual image of content" (p. 66).

Podlozny's (2000) "meta-analysis of research" on the integration of theater arts in the classroom examined role play and verbal skills. It exemplified that there is a positive correlation between the use of drama and written comprehension test scores. In other words, the students who participated in theater arts activities related to what they were learning performed better on comprehension tests. This indicated that the reading they were doing was meaningful and functional. As Podlozny stated, "We can conclude that the experience of acting out stories increases children's understanding of new stories; it increases their vocabulary, oral language, and writing skills, whether applied to the stories enacted or to entirely new material, and it increases their reading ability for new material (p. 105). Similarly, DuPont (1992) demonstrated that students whose reading

lessons integrated theater arts-type strategies in conjunction with reading literature performed better on subsequent reading comprehension tests.

A study by Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskava, and Hardiman (2011) posited that "the arts may engage learners in thinking about new information in ways that improve retention" (p. 144), and found "support for the theory that arts integration naturally leads students to interact with academic content in ways that promote long-term retention" (p. 147). Similarly, Clapper (2010) concluded that "simulation and role play can be important learning strategies that will create long-lasting understanding" (Abstract). He elaborated:

> …the use of role-play and simulation should be more commonplace, given its proven value as a learning strategy…Role-play allows for a great deal of understanding to be achieved while also addressing critical skills…Educational leaders would be well-advised to include this important strategy…as a school-wide initiative across disciplines. (p. 43)

Hartman (2013) showed that there seems to be an important relationship between theatre arts and social studies education that is integral in getting students to memorize "facts, concepts, and ideologies" (p. 56). Catterall (2002) suggested that the benefits of incorporating drama in the classroom was even more profound, aiding reading comprehension, interpersonal skills (including the ability to understand how people relate to one another in society, emotions associated with complicated human issues, what motivates people, and conflict resolution), writing proficiency, problem-solving, and knowing/understanding oneself. Astoundingly, he hinted that these benefits may be transferrable to other, unrelated subject areas.

Oreck, Dean, and Owen (1997) also found increases in student engagement because of arts integration in the classroom, noting that

> after brief arts activities, typically inattentive students often began contributing to discussions or risked answering a question. As they became active, enthusiastic learners and class leaders, their teachers immediately saw the benefits of the arts-infused approach and recognized the academic potential of those students. (p. 15)

They further found that artistically-inclined students who had shown patterns of low scoring on traditional-type reading tests showed significant improvements after the arts integration activities.

Ron Berger, a teacher at an arts-integrated school in Massachusetts, said that in his classroom the arts are not just an occasional tool to add variety, "but rather a primary context in which most information is learned and shared" (Dickinson, 1997, para. 18). Berger felt that the arts had "a profound effect on student understanding, investment, and standards . . . the arts are an incredible tool for 'ratcheting up' the quality of work and standards in a school" (para. 18).

Walker, Tabone, and Weltsek (2011) found that impoverished students from an urban school district who had been participants in "arts-integrated" classrooms had a greatly increased chance of passing state assessments in reading and mathematics. Specifically, their chances increased by 77% in reading and by 42% in mathematics. Astoundingly, even after students had departed the arts-integrated project (theater arts) and returned to a more traditional classroom setting, they maintained significant gains over their traditional classroom counterparts. The power of the arts to help impoverished students retain content was echoed by the experience of the John Eliot School in

Massachusetts, where the arts are "fully integrated throughout the curriculum and academic achievement is soaring" (Dickinson, 1997, para. 17). The school "does not cater to superior, talented students and many are economically disadvantaged," but in 1992 the school attained the highest assessment scores in the state of Massachusetts (para. 17).

Content retention for students of the arts may transfer to other subject areas. Americans for the Arts (2014) cited

> data from The College Board [showing] that in 2013, students who took four years of arts and music classes while in high school (only 18% of test takers) scored an average of 95 points better on their SATs than students who took only one-half year or less (scores of 1061 vs. 966, respectively). (para. 1)

For writing in particular, "students with four years of art and music classes averaged 520 on the Writing portion of the test, 59 points higher than students with one-half year or less of arts/music classes" (para. 3).

Arts Integration and Fostering a Sense of Community

For the purposes of this study, "sense of community" is defined as including the following dimensions: safety and sense of belonging, considering the multiple intelligences, ensuring inclusion & accessibility of content for all student sub-populations, providing exposure to multiple perspectives, nurturing interpersonal skills, and promoting cultural awareness, social consciousness, and relevance/real-world connections. In addition, "sense of community" includes providing opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration between/among teachers as well as the personal experience of the individual teacher.

Werner (2002) reported that arts integration seemed to have a beneficial effect on school climate, teacher collaboration, and sense of community. Pecaski McLennan (2008) found that "sociodrama" in the classroom appeared to help develop a sense of caring and community, and that the "self-confidence and self-expression through risk-taking and exploration in activities that explore real life personal feelings and situations" may transfer to the skill of "expressing care" for others (p. 451). These feelings of caring, self-confidence, and risk-taking equate to a feeling of belonging and safety in the history classroom, which is conducive to learning.

Dr. Howard Gardner, of Harvard University, advocates for schools moving beyond solely verbal and logical-mathematical teaching and learning paradigms, since he has identified eight, and possibly nine, different types of unique human intelligences. These so called "intelligences" can be seen as various ways that human beings process their world (Gardner, 2008). Dickinson (1997) explained that

> …these intelligences provide the foundations for the visual arts, music, dance, and drama, and through these art forms most students will not only find the means for communication and self-expression, but the tools to construct meaning and learn almost any subject effectively. (para. 32)

Dickinson (1997) argued for arts integration in classrooms because they can "help reach the great diversity of human beings in every school today . . . In all schools today there is a growing diversity of students with different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds that result in very different ways of thinking, learning, and behaving" (para. 28) and that these students are often placed into the same classroom together. Dickinson added, "Even students with similar backgrounds perceive and process information differently" (para.

28).

Colley (2012) found that "using the performing arts in social studies methods not only promotes student engagement and learning, but gives a voice to students that are rarely heard" (p. 4). This indicated that, in addition to strengthening the learning and participation of all students, skits may tend to inspire students who normally do not willingly participate. Skits could give the shy or reluctant students an impetus to get involved in class activities. In addition, use of skits in the classroom may simply help students remember things better. Lorimer's research (2011) paralleled Colley's discovery that arts integration is a way to reach all learners in the classroom. Based upon the data showing that arts integration fostered "effective and engaging learning for diverse student populations" (p. 9), Lorimer suggested that there is a basis for a change in educational policy which would allow for a culture of education that is more open to arts integration in the core classes. Similarly, Donahue and Stuart (2010) expressed that regular, daily arts integration can help teachers to be more successful in helping every child learn.

Nolan (2007) demonstrated that teaching through the arts helps teachers reach every student, each of whom has a unique learning style. Therefore, arts integration supports differentiated instruction in that it helps reach students that can be classified as having any of the seven multiple intelligences (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal). Groth and Albert (1997) listed a plethora of reasons to implement the arts into the classroom. For example, they found that not only did arts appeal to multiple intelligences, generate interest in the material, and foster critical thinking, but that teacher enthusiasm was also enhanced.

Oreck, Dean, and Owen demonstrated that arts integration had positive benefits for artistically-inclined students who had not responded well to traditional learning activities as evidenced by past low test scores. Once their learning style was accommodated, these students' test scores rose significantly. "We saw huge changes to those with more kinesthetic, musical, and artistic tendencies" (para. 22), stated researcher Oreck (as cited in Dickinson, 1997).

Robinson (2013) showed that arts integration holds promise for teaching Common Core standards to disadvantaged student populations, including "Economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students with disabilities" (p. 191). Dwyer concurred, noting that "[Recent studies] have also demonstrated particular benefits from arts integration for economically disadvantaged students and English learners in the form of reading achievement gains—not surprising given the similarities between effective language instruction techniques and visual arts and theatre skills" (as cited in McCarty & Delk, 2012, p. 59).

Rabkin and Redmond (2005) analyzed research reviews and longitudinal studies and concluded that students from impoverished backgrounds reap myriad benefits from arts association, saying, "We found the most powerful effects consistently associated with programs that integrate the arts with subjects in the core curriculum" (p. 46). Ingram and Seashore (2003) also pointed out that the power of arts integration seems to have an even more profound effect on the disadvantaged than other types of learners.

Mason, Steedly, & Thormann (2005) explained how arts integration can have a major positive impact academically in students with disabilities. Furthermore, arts integration helped to "level the playing field" for all students, both with or without

disabilities, because they were no longer stifled by traditional ideas of a "right" or "wrong" way to do assignments or what classroom activities would be appropriate for them (p. 13). Theater arts in the classroom was found to have positive effects on students from a wide array of disadvantaged backgrounds, including students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and students living in poverty (Mason, Steedly, & Thormann, 2005).

Klein (2010) found that "for the children who have learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders, studies have also shown that creative drama can dramatically help these children to become more socially competent" as they work in collaboration with other students for a common goal (p. 3). Therefore, the implementation of creative drama both respected diversity and enhanced a sense of community in the classroom.

Students who are new to the country generally take up to two years to develop a working social (not academic) communication ability in their new language (Haynes, 2007). During that time, academic textbooks may be impractical for these students. To develop more complex skills beyond social communications can take up to ten years (Haynes, 2007). In contrast to highly academic-language textbooks, skits are written in a non-threatening, "regular" conversational tone, and can be a boon for students who are new to English. The "playing field is leveled" when they can experience success and become a participating member of the classroom community by delving into reading skits written in relaxed, social language (Mason, Steedly, & Thormann, 2005, p. 13). A study by Farrell demonstrated that "drama techniques were an effective method for promoting facility in English as a second language among young children. The drama group exhibited significantly greater improvement than the control group in total verbal output"

(as cited in Dickinson, 1997, para. 55).

Furthermore, reluctant or unmotivated students can benefit from the high-level engagement that skits provide. Skits prove to cause even the most withdrawn student to become actively engaged in the lesson and develop positive feelings towards learning. Nolan and Patterson (2000) found that via the use of skits, ELL students "overcame their fear of speaking and improved their teamwork skills and self-confidence in speaking English with expression" (p. 6). In addition, Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) confirmed that students of English as a foreign language significantly improve their speaking abilities by participating in role-play in the classroom. Tindall (2012) found that role-play in the form or reader's theater extended to adult English Language Learners, and described drama as "an attractive instructional choice for ESL educators" (p. 36).

The National Association for Gifted Children, advocates for the arts, stated that they hold "special benefits for gifted and talented learners" (National Association for Gifted Children, 2017). "NAGC believes that arts education is fundamental to an appropriate education for gifted and talented learners and should be addressed through domain-specific opportunities and authentic integration across the curriculum" (para. 1). NAGC referenced the work of Hetland and Winner (2001) in stating that "the arts offer students a way of thinking that is not available in other disciplines" (para. 22). Smutny (2002) cited various studies demonstrating why arts integration might be crucial in the education of gifted children due to its ability to heighten "observation, abstract thinking, and problem analysis" (p. 2) as well as allow them the ability to bring "their own unique insight, ability, and vision to a subject (p. 6). Smutny argued that this research is sufficient to demonstrate why arts integration needs to be an indispensable aspect of

education for this student population (p. 2).

Koppelman and Goodhart (2010) described the difficulties teachers often encounter in their attempts to create "culturally responsive" classrooms. Reliance upon traditional methods has "continually resulted in low achievement of diverse populations and a lack of motivation and engagement of students" (Reif & Grant, 2010 p. 100). Klein (2010) showed that the use of creative drama both respected diversity and enhanced a sense of community in the classroom. Furthermore, students from such diverse backgrounds come to the classroom with myriad learning styles—many that may have been touted in their culture of origin—that must all be reconciled, and theater arts can be that binding agent. Traditional, "same-old, same-old" content and teaching methods may not be very effective in motivating such a multiculturally diverse set of students; in fact, they target only two out of eight known multiple intelligences (Reif & Grant, 2010).

Dickinson (1997) remarked that "the arts are potent carriers of cultural meaning" (para. 62). Through arts integration, students appeared to acquire an improved social consciousness or deeper understanding of marginalized and disenfranchised communities throughout the ages (Burstein & Knotts, 2011). Arts integration such as the use of theater arts in the classroom may even help foster cultural awareness among students (Reif & Grant, 2010). Maxine Greene (1995) intimated that the arts may foster imagination in students by allowing them to transcend their own personal experiences and begin to realize the vast nature of human differences. Students will naturally become curious and begin to ask questions and to develop a keen imagination for what they have not yet experienced. Therefore, the arts help to develop the social consciousness that is so necessary for "living in our culturally diverse world" (Dickinson, 1997, para. 62).

Demographics are shifting; school districts are grappling with the realities of teaching students for whom English is a second language, or who come from school systems that look vastly different from ours (Reif & Grant, 2010). And yet, arts integration such as theater arts helps break the ice in the classroom and lightens the mood, while at the same time fostering community and serving as an effective teaching and learning tool.

Anderson (2011) concluded that in order to foster student engagement, students must be able to understand the relevance between course content and their own lives. Burstein and Knotts (2010) suggested that arts integration can promote student engagement with social studies content to the extent that they can better understand how the past connects to their own lives. John Dewey encapsulated the power of the arts to help students make connections between themselves and the world: "A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live" (Dewey, 1934, p. 199).

Deasy (2002) concluded that students who participate in classroom skits may be better able to comprehend character motivation. Catterall's (2002) study illustrated how integrating drama in the classroom can help students understand difficult concepts by highlighting the points of view of characters (or historical figures) as well as the emotional impact of events in which they participated. Dickinson (1997) noted that schools in which the arts are integrated across subject areas develop a keener ability to understand others' points of view.

Maxine Greene (2008) believed in the ability of arts integration to foster social consciousness, multiple perspectives, and real-world relevance in the following quote: "The arts open up imagination and new perspectives, fostering wide-awakeness and an

awareness of the world around you." She noted that "once we begin to imagine other possibilities, we begin to 'feel those multiple realities that mark lived experience in the world' and understand how our own reality fits into that whole" (as cited in Dickinson, 1997, para. 62). John Dewey (1934) felt that the arts help "break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" in helping students come to the epiphanies that will allow them to become fully productive citizens of the society at large.

A report by Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, & McLaughlin (2007) states that "Arts integration is often defined as a process of collaboration" (p. 14). Pinciotti's 1993 study on creative drama exemplified that students who participated in creative drama seemed to have improved interpersonal skills as evidenced by their ability to communicate their emotions in tandem with other participants (as cited in Dickinson, 1997). Dickinson (1997) stated that the "goal of creative drama is to build the dramatic imagination in a social context and to develop the ability of children to connect imagination to action, not just in drama, but for every day" (para. 56). Dickinson added that

> creative drama activities overtly build and enhance knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings through interaction and collaboration with others. Gradually these qualities become integrated into private thought, covert behaviors, and a shared consciousness. Creative drama becomes a partner in the development of abstract thought. (para. 56)

The interpersonal skills of listening, speaking, and teamwork are among some of the benefits derived from using skits in class (Kent & Sampson, 2008). Catterall (2002) also showed that students related to each other interpersonally with much more ease after experiencing theater arts in social studies class. Colley (2012) explained how the

interpersonal skills of reluctant students are improved because they may be inspired to make their voices heard and become a more active part of the community. A sense of community can also be fostered by student collaboration for a common goal, as is the case with arts integration such as skits, as they strive together for an effective reading or performance (Klein, 2010). Arts integration also appears to strengthen students' communication skills as they practice interacting with each other via the safety of the skits (McCarty & Delk, 2012).

Interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers also seems to be supported by the implementation of arts integration activities, thereby fostering a stronger sense of community among teachers and their students. As pointed out by Detels (1999), teachers who specialize in arts (as electives) and those who teach the so-called "core" classes (social studies, science, English, and mathematics) are perpetually isolated from each other, without much opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration or sense of community. Through a six-year study, Catterall, et al. (1999) found that arts integration involving partnerships between teachers and theater arts specialists was not only popular, but correlated with higher standardized scores over time in both reading and mathematics. Werner (2002) found that, through purposeful integration of the arts in non-arts-related classes, teachers reported an increased ability to collaborate, became more skilled at arts integration, and maintained an arts-integration outlook in their classrooms afterward. Furthermore, school climate was improved, and staff experienced an improved sense of community as a result of the arts integration collaboration.

Williamson and Zimmerman (2009) showed how collaboration between core-area teachers and theater arts teachers to integrate performing arts into the curriculum can

facilitate content learning. They iterated how students displayed increased motivation and engagement, and how end-of-class discussions revealed a deeper awareness of target content that the students were supposed to learn. Taylor (2008) demonstrated that "the deliberate integration of the performing arts and social studies may enhance teaching and learning in both fields," which gives even more basis for encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration in education (p. 235). Dr. Howard Gardner expressed his belief that students can learn "almost any subject effectively" through the arts, and that "this is especially true when the arts are not only taught as separate subjects but integrated throughout the curriculum at every level," which may be fostered by interdisciplinary collaboration (as cited in Dickinson, 1997, para. 32).

Social Justice-Cultivating Format and Components of Saeed's Skits

As previously stated, Saeed's skits—the focus of this study—are presented in a reader's theater format, and are defined as "a short theatrical sketch or act, usually comical" (Dictionary.com 2016). "Reader's theater" implies a briefer, more laid-back version of a play or skit which does not have to be memorized. Cornwell (2016) defines reader's theater as:

> readers reading a script adapted from literature, and the audience picturing the action from hearing the script being read aloud. It requires no sets, costumes, props, or memorized lines. Instead of acting out literature as in a play, the performer's goal is to read a script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action. Performers bring the text alive by using voice, facial expressions, and some gestures. (para. 2)

A smorgasbord of benefits is derived from using these low-stress skits in class, such as

reading fluency and confidence, listening and speaking skills, teamwork, vocabulary enhancement, and content knowledge (Kent & Sampson, 2008). McLennan (2008) focused in on the value of reader's theater and role-plays to reinforce the content that educators want students to learn from particular lessons.

Humor, Fictional Elements, Popular Culture, and/or "Weirdness." Humor, fictional elements, "weirdness," and/or aspects of popular culture that are laced into Saeed's skits may also have positive benefits for student learning. Prosser Jr. (1997) showed that the incorporation of humor may bolster student engagement by capturing student attention. Garner (2006) explained that student engagement can foster content retention and memory when jokes pertinent to the content were interspersed throughout the lesson in a contextual manner.

Cornett (1986) further noted that when humor is integrated into classroom lessons, student motivation and energy increase substantially; she suggested incorporating humor throughout lessons to maintain student attention. In addition, Berk (2000) found that when humor was used either prior to or during an exam, student performance may improve. Schatz and LoSchiavo (2005) discovered that when jokes and cartoons were peppered throughout online course content, students became more engaged as evidenced by their logging on more often. They noted, "Humor can also help create an online atmosphere that encourages participation, creativity, and exploration... The judicious, appropriate, and timely use of humor allows instructors to teach and model a critical educational lesson – learning is fun" (para. 35). Berk (2002) stated, "Your students should be having so much fun that they probably will not even realize how much they're learning" (p. xviii).

Berk highlighted the opportunity for differentiation afforded by humor, asserting, "It (taps) into students' multiple intelligences and learning styles in a way that forces them to think in divergent and real-life ways" (as cited in Stambor, 2006, p. 62). Moreover, laughter resulting from humor appears to buttress sense of community by increasing "tolerance, acceptance, and sympathy towards others" (Lyttle, 2003, para. 18). Hampes (2010) demonstrated that humor may help nurture interpersonal relationships, since humor was found to be correlated with various types of empathy and "perspective-taking" (p. 36). "To successfully use and appreciate humor involves a person's ability to shift mentally to different perspectives, which could be helpful in understanding and experiencing the thoughts and feelings of another person" (Hampes, 2010, p. 35). Humorous skit elements may help students become more receptive to learning content in history classrooms. "Humor in communication creates an open atmosphere by awakening positive emotions that enhance listening, understanding, and acceptance of messages," (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006, p. 61).

Group cohesion may be strengthened by humor, contributing to a sense of teamwork or togetherness (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Humor promotes among people a sense of a "shared context" or belonging as well as safety (Hayworth, 1929; Lyttle, 2003). This was mirrored by the research of laughter expert Dr. Robert Provine (2000), who discussed laughter as being an integral part of supportive environments through its ability to "serve as a bond to bring people together (p. 1). Humor also "lowers defenses and brings individuals together," fostering community (Henderson, 2015, para. 2). Humor may also help foster appreciation for diversity, since humor reflects the social norms and values of various cultures (Cornett, 1986). A positive environment and even

quality of life may be fostered by the use of humor as well (Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller, & Hampes, 1997). Moreover, humor may reduce anger in students with emotional disturbances, and greatly dispel (or at least moderate) general stress or anxiety among a wide range of students (Forbes, 1997; Kuiper & Martin, 1998; Newman & Stone, 1996). Berk (2000) noted that the use of humor not only makes even the most challenging material fun, but when purposely included in class activities such as tests, may result in decreased anxiety. Cornett (1986) concurred, stating that laughter makes us "all feel more relaxed; we are relieved of tension…our mood is positive and spirits are high. No stress-management workshop could offer more!" (p. 30). Humorous skits may also help students make friends by way of the bonding among individuals and groups that occurs after the pleasurable sensation of laughter.

There is evidence that lacing fictional and/or "weird" material into the factual content may help students to better envision the past. According to Freeman and Levstik (1988), implementing historical fiction into social studies classes will help students to put themselves in the place of historical figures and be better able to understand the issues surrounding historical events. In the face of increasing budget cuts, conducting readers' theatre-type simulations in the classroom is a way for students to take a field trip of sorts without ever leaving the classroom. Incorporating fictional details helps make the skit more interesting and enticing, while still allowing students to extract the curricular knowledge that is necessary for them to learn.

Berk (2002) suggested the use of "outrageous" (p. 6), "hypothetical" (p. 60), "exaggerated" (p. 95), or "ridiculous" (p. 136) examples when explaining what might otherwise be mundane content. Anderson (2011) suggested that "making the past strange

through the use of multiple perspectives (helps) students relate to the past. Strangeness piques student interest having them view the past through the perspective of the people of that time" (p. 3). In a sense, the strangeness factor helps build a broader sense of community, connected through time and space, by helping students discover what they have in common with the historical figures of the past as well as glimpsing the past through their eyes.

There are several examples in popular culture which are similar in format to Saeed's skits: political cartoons and satirical comedy news shows. Skits can serve a very similar purpose to political cartoons, whose original intent was to "relay the ideas of the intellectual elite to the masses" (Backer, 2016b, para. 17). Political cartoons are effective because they can "influence public opinion through (the) use of widely and instantly understood symbols, slogans, referents, and allusions" (para. 5). The most famous early example of a political cartoon was Benjamin Franklin's (1754) *Join or Die* cartoon, in which a multi-segmented snake (representing the colonies) was depicted as treacherous to the Union, unless the segments could work together to fend off enemies. The ingenious depiction easily conveyed to a broad audience the sophisticated political ideas behind the cartoon. It was easily "understood among all classes" of people; furthermore, "everyone could relate (to) and understand (the cartoons), and more importantly respond" (McCallum, 2014, para. 4). As Backer (2016a) noted,

> the factor which probably influenced the rise of cartoons more than any other cultural condition was a high illiteracy rate…The distribution of simple broadsheet posters or illustrated pamphlets throughout population centers proved to be an effective strategy because the images would reach a large amount of

people and enjoy the greatest possible amount of comprehension. (para. 2)

This is precisely what I have attempted to do via my "content-rich" history skits. Although the stories of American history should not be intellectually elitist, the format (such as textbooks) through which they are told is often difficult to negotiate for many students (Kincheloe, 2005; Loewen, 2007, 2016; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). The skit format can immensely facilitate understanding. And, as McCallum (2014) noted, the most important aspect is not only understanding what one is seeing, but being able to subsequently take part in the meaningful discussion afterward. In this sense, I believe my skits can help students become more participatory citizens (hooks, 1994) as they increase their understanding of their own country's history, in a similar manner to political cartoons (Franklin, 1754).

Saeed's skits are unique tools for the American History classroom because they blend essential content with fictional and often humorous elements that are missing from traditional methods. Another example of teaching the masses via popular culture and a hybrid of fictional and non-fictional elements can be seen in the example of the wildly popular satire news show formerly hosted by Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show* (2014). While Stewart's show is classified as satire, Stewart presents factual news events, often integrating humor to prove his points. Increasingly, Stewart's format has been discussed by many as one that is very effective at reaching various groups of people, sparking discussion and debate across political lines. He is especially known for the success of his show among young adults, who are often new to voting. Stewart's show is undeniably comedy-based entertainment, but it also provides valuable insight into the American democratic process and political system. After his first appearance on *The Daily Show* in

2007, when asked by CBS News why he went on a comedy show, President Obama responded,

> Jon is able to break through some of the silliness of the campaign season, and, in a way, you actually end up being more truthful and end up talking more substance on a show like this than you do sometimes on some of these other shows (Popkin, 2012, p. 9).

Finally, according to a Pew Research poll, "Viewers of humorous news shows such as The Daily Show and The Colbert Report exhibited higher retention of news facts than those who got their news from newspapers, CNN, Fox News, or network stations" (Henderson, 2015, para. 3).

The research findings regarding artists and/or comedians who are more effective at relaying news to the masses (than traditional news formats) might not be surprising to John Dewey if he were alive today. He once stated that the arts can help "break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" and that "artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception, and appreciation" (Dewey, 1927, pp. 183-184).

Summary

Skits, such as Saeed's skits, fit into the progressive educational framework (Dewey, 1897; Kohn, 2008). As such, skits are a progressive/arts integration activity that promotes depth of understanding, awareness of one's connections to each other and the world, opportunities for individualization, critical thinking/challenging the status quo, interpersonal communication, lifetime learning, appreciation for diverse cultures and

worldviews, and an appreciation for alternate ways to express meaning and understanding, such as through the arts (Dewey, 1897; Kohn, 2008). There are many problems in social studies education that may prevent teachers from choosing the activities they want to use in their classrooms; teachers are often mandated to use ineffective methods, even though effective and engaging methods are available (Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, 2003; Craig, 2009; Dunn, 2013; Kincheloe, 2005; Loewen, 2007, 2016; Steinbach; 2013). Role-play and drama have been shown to foster improved learning environments and outcomes (Alakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010; Brock, 2011; Catterall, 2002; Clapper, 2010; Colley, 2012; Deasy, 2002; Graves, 2008; Kent & Sampson, 2008; Klein, 2010; McLennan, 2008; Podlozny, 2000; Nolan & Patterson, 2000; Pecaski McLennan, 2008; Reif & Grant, 2010; Robinson & Schur, 2010; Taylor, 2008; Williamson & Zimmerman, 2009). Role-play and drama appear to be effective, but the humor inherent in skits--and the resulting laughter--specifically appear to relay their own benefits for student engagement and sense of community (Cornett, 1986; Forbes, 1997; Garner, 2006; Hampes, 2010; Hayworth, 1929; Henderson, 2015; Kuiper & Martin, 1998; Newman & Stone, 1996; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Schatz & LoSchiavo, 2005; Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller, & Hampes, 1997).

In short, traditional methods (and status quo attitudes), frequently ill-informed pronouncements of politicians and administrators, a lack of creative history teaching resources on the market, and increasing micromanagement of teachers (and upper administration's encroachment upon their autonomy) are realities that possibly prevent teachers from employing methods that are not only more enjoyable for all involved, but may be significantly more effective in helping students learn. By fostering student

engagement and sense of community, integrating arts such as skits and role plays may promote content retention, learning among historically marginalized populations, interdisciplinary collaboration, a love of lifelong learning, and so much more. As Fiske (1999) noted, "The arts must be a basic part of…learning experiences", and that a body of knowledge is emerging that definitely demonstrates a need to "[seek] systematic ways to make the arts a meaningful part of every American child's life" (p. xii).

Chapter III

"What is considered a vice in science--openness to competing interpretations—is a virtue in narrative."—Barbara Czarniawska

Methodology

Qualitative Research Design: Rationale

The goal of this research was to illuminate teacher perceptions of social justice themes in conjunction with the integration of Saeed's skits into American History classrooms. Specifically, the aim was to discover how the implementation of more arts integration-based progressive teaching methods, such as skits, may help to foster a more social justice-oriented environment including increased student engagement and sense of community. As Patton (2002) noted, "qualitative methods facilitate the study of issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry" (p. 14). The results of this research study will ideally contribute toward a positive transformation of society in that teachers will be enlightened about the benefits of incorporating skits into their classroom repertoire. White (2015) described the advantages of qualitative research, stating that it:

> often takes much longer and involves a more in-depth investigation than other research methods. A particular highlight emanating from qualitative research is a richness of story detailing human experiences. The effort at triangulation contributes to the richness of the story in that a variety of qualitative methods are adapted to meet the needs of the research—questions, story, engagement, and focus. (p. 5)

Continuing his explanation of the favorableness of qualitative research, White turned his attention to the roles of the researcher and the final research product.

> Writing through one's perspective is also vital in qualitative research so as to challenge the assumption that one needs to make grand claims or generalize. A particular goal is to personalize the research by making the process and procedures one's own by continually adapting questions and procedures as more is investigated and discovered. Finally, the understanding is that the research is a story in time, hopefully moving humanity forward, but also leading to further questions and next steps for research/investigation. (p. 5)

With the aim of exploring teacher perceptions related to skits and social justice, a qualitative design was warranted for several reasons. The research focused upon the stories of the researcher and two additional teachers, to learn more about their unique perceptions and experiences using a specific phenomenon—skits as teaching tools. These stories helped to determine how these experiences fit into the broader historical context of the individual teachers' lives, personalities, and worldviews, as well as their classrooms, schools, districts, and society at large. The stories presented a detailed vision of how social justice is being fostered by the use of skits in American History classrooms. Furthermore, the researcher served as the interpreter, along with participants, of their stories. Qualitative research design therefore helped to paint the clearest picture of the phenomenon examined (Creswell, 2007).

Narrative inquiry methodology. Based upon the research goal of holistically describing in-depth teacher perceptions of the social justice impact of Saeed's skits in American history classrooms, and within the framework of qualitative design, a multi-

pronged narrative inquiry approach was ideal. A mixture of narrative self-inquiry (autobiographical narrative inquiry) and narrative inquiry (storying and restorying experience) was used. Narrative inquiry of both types has been effectively used before by Clandinin (1986), Clandinin and Connelly (1990, 2000), Clandinin, Huber, J., Huber, M., et al. (2006), Connelly & Clandinin (2006), Craig and Huber (2006), and Craig (2007). Connelly & Clandinin (2006) discussed narrative inquiry and its application in qualitative research. They explained that narrative inquiry is "the study of experience as a story" (p. 375), and as such, it is primarily a way of reflecting upon experience. Because this research was related to discovering the perspectives of teachers and based directly upon their experiences implementing skits in their classrooms, narrative inquiry was the ideal methodology. In addition, "narrative inquiries almost always are about people's lives, their interests, concerns, and passions," and as such are a perfect conduit for understanding the phenomenon of using skits as a tool to foster social justice (Phillion, p. 17). Eliciting stories helps us to understand the views of others and what role their experiences played in shaping them (Cavendish, 2011). The addition of the researchers' story with that of teacher participants helped to create a "collaborative narrative" that gave a more complete picture of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). For example, it helped reveal how our perceptions—mine and my participants', as a result of our experiences, proved to be similar with regards to skits and social justice.

Phase one of the inquiry. Narrative self-inquiry was an essential component of this research study, serving as the first step of the research design. The researcher has a unique life story, and her life experiences profoundly laid the groundwork for the

eventual birth of these skits. In the researcher's view, the unique skits she created have helped her to foster social justice in her own American History classroom. Therefore, including her lived experience was essential to informing the reader of her background, and to serve as a comparison point for the later participant interviews. Dewey believed that individual experiences should be a centerpiece of understanding human beings (Creswell, 2012). Polkinghorne (1995) stated, "Stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experience in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes" (p. 8). Including the researcher's story was crucial, because when added to the stories of teacher participants, an even more complete picture was painted of teacher perceptions regarding skits and social justice in American history classrooms. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained that "Narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical. Our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines" (p. 121). Further, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) pointed out that the researcher's personal story is inseparable from his or her research. In fact, they suggest that narrative researchers should not pretend to be objective observers, and should instead be explicit in detailing the level of their involvement. Ultimately, the inclusion of the researcher's personal story and relationship to teacher participants aided in the development of a clearer and more revealing narrative in this inquiry.

Phase two of the inquiry. Narrative inquiry (storying and restorying experience) methods were used as the second phase of the research design. In effect, interviews yielded the stories of two teacher participants. Creswell (2003) noted that interviews can encourage teacher participants to share their personal stories. As Greenhalgh, et al.

detailed (as cited in Wengraf, 2008), stories are "perspectival," "make sense of experience," "convey multiple and complex truths," are "embedded in a context," reflect an "ethical dimension," help "bridge the gap between formal codified space of an organization and informal codified space," "offer insights into what might have been," are "action oriented," are "inherently subversive," and demonstrate "leadership" (p. 3). Teachers' stories related to the integration of skits in their American history classrooms illuminated their perceptions on how, specifically, social justice environment may have been fostered. As Bruner (as cited in Chaitlin, 2003) described, storytelling or "narrative mode" is a normal way that human beings make sense of the world, and that through stories we can look more closely at how humans attempt to meet goals over time, see "what obstacles were encountered" (para. 7) and how people either overcame them or failed to do so.

Barbara Czarniawska (2004) aptly described the contributions of narrative inquiry: "The narrative structure of human life requires unpredictability, and paradoxically, why the alleged failure of the social sciences (namely, their failure to formulate laws and consequently their failure to predict) is in fact their greatest achievement" (p. 13). Czarniawska added: "Unpredictability does not imply inexplicability. Explanations are possible because there is a certain teleology—sense of purpose—in all lived narratives" (p. 13). Therefore, a lived narrative is not only a form of communication, but a form of knowledge that facilitates meaning-making and informs the researcher, as well as the scientific body of knowledge. In describing MacIntyre's (1981/1990) assertion that human sciences (including narrative inquiry) are older than the natural sciences, she quipped, "The kind of explanations they (social sciences) offer fit

perfectly the kind of phenomena they purport to explain" (p. 13). In effect, these narratives become texts, inherent in which are all of the claims of truth that any other text enjoys.

The individual interviews took place in one session and consisted of 12 questions. Follow-up questions and topics were prepared for several of the interview questions, to use if necessary. Follow-up interviews served as a member-checking session in which themes generated during the data analysis were shared with teacher participants to seek clarification and confirmation, as well as to ask entirely new and pertinent questions that were sparked from the original interview analysis. This greatly facilitated the focus group session, in which the interactive format necessitated the sharing of information.

Phase three of the inquiry. Phase three of this research consisted of a focus group session involving the researcher and both teacher participants. After the individual interviews were complete, participants were invited to come together into a whole-group focus session to once again go over the interpretations and findings, allow for even further clarification, and to give participants yet another chance to make their voice heard. This focus group session provided another opportunity to make further comparisons and contrasts among teacher experiences, and for teachers to express statements or opinions they may have failed to mention during their individual interviews. It also served to solidify or confirm previously made statements by teachers, or, conversely, highlight contradictions. While the researcher primarily used the original interview questions as a framework, the focus group session was also an opportunity to ask new questions arising from the analysis of the individual interviews, and to speak freely about issues related to the research topic.

According to Nagle and Williams (2016), focus groups can be woven into a larger study to help researchers gain deeper insights. They stated:

> Group interaction and non-verbal communication are primary benefits of focus groups. Group interaction between members of the target population during focus groups may encourage participants to make connections to various concepts through the discussions that may not occur during individual interviews. (p. 2)

The addition of this focus group session served to triangulate and confirm information collected during individual interviews. Lambert and Loiselle (2007) discussed the combination of individual interviews and focus group sessions to "enhance data richness" (p. 228). Lambert & Loiselle (2007) noted that individual interviews and focus groups "can be combined for purposes of data completeness and confirmation" (p. 230). Lambert and Loiselle (2007) further stated that when these two methods are used together, "the data obtained by one method are anticipated to corroborate those acquired with the other" (p. 230). Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Shenton, 2004) asserted that the "use of 'overlapping methods' such as focus group and individual interview" helps to ensure "credibility and dependability" (p. 71). Azzara (2010) noted that focus group interaction is excellent for drawing out "latent issues" that were not illuminated during the individual interviews (para. 13).

Data Collection and Ethics Considerations

Upon researcher completion of the proposal defense process, an application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects (IRB). The process of contacting prospective teacher participants to enroll them in the study was dependent upon timely return of IRB application approval. Immediately after securing IRB

approval, the researcher contacted prospective participants to secure their enrollment, and shortly thereafter procured signed release forms confirming their willingness to participate in this study. Teacher participants were informed that the original interview would consist of 12 questions; in addition, a follow-up interview would be needed for purposes of member-checking, clarification, and possible further questioning. Additionally, a whole-group/focus group session would be planned after the individual interviews. Once consent was given, interview appointments were set up to accommodate the schedules of the participants. Participants' preferences for interview locations were accommodated to maximize their comfort level. They indicated their desire to meet at two different restaurants, and this was obliged. To increase the chance of adhering to the appointment times, email and text reminders were disseminated at least twice starting a few days before, as well as the day before, each meeting.

The interviews and focus group session were aimed at gathering data germane to the main research question of this study. These interviews were semi-structured, and either completed one-on-one between the researcher and participant, or in a focus group session consisting of the researcher and both teacher participants. Interviews were recorded for the purposes of being able to transcribe and code the conversations for analysis. At the outset of each phase of the study, participants were reminded of the purpose of the research and why their input would be essential to its success. Participants were expressly advised that they were being recorded, and their permission was solicited and documented before continuing, even if the researcher had gotten their permission previously. Because of the interactive nature of the focus group session, and the involvement of a third party, the researcher sought verbal consent once again to ensure

that teacher participants still desired to continue.

From the recordings made during the interviews, Microsoft Word files of researcher transcripts were created. The integrity of these files was (and is) maintained via safekeeping in the researcher's personal computer, to which access is granted only through a password. Because there were only two participants, no study code key was necessary for identification purposes. Pseudonyms were assigned to the two teacher participants of this study, and their legal names only exist on the informed consent forms. As part of informed consent, permission was requested to use participants' interview excerpts, anonymously, either whole or in part, to be published as part of this research. To ensure that teacher participants' input was understood and portrayed accurately and fairly, contact was maintained with them throughout all stages of this collaborative process.

Data Analysis

Clean transcripts were derived from the individual interviews and focus group session (Elliot, 2005). This type of interview transcript omitted utterances that did not add to the meaning of what was being stated. An in-depth reading of these transcripts was undertaken, including reading, re-reading, and annotation; stories were then created from the information. The creation of an individual story for each teacher participant was an important step in the data analysis process. As Lichtman (2012) noted, "Storytelling or narrative is an alternate way of making sense of the data" (p. 243). Creswell (2007) referred to this process as "restorying." In a sense, the story serves as a facilitator in theme generation. The creation of a storyline is "primary to analyzing [the] data" and the "analytic thread that unite[d] and integrate[d] the major themes of the evaluation"

(Coding Qualitative Data, 2012, p. 1). Clandinin and Connelly (as cited in Creswell, 2007) also advocated for a reconstruction of the participant interviews based upon the plot structure of stories. Given the researcher's background as both a performance artist and a teacher who desires to foster social justice, it was an especially appropriate element of the inquiry. This entire dissertation was based upon the telling of stories and meaning-making, whether it be through skits or through interviews.

All of the stories (the researcher's personal story as well as stories generated from interviews and focus group session) were analyzed using the same technique. From the stories, the data was reduced, or coded, into themes or categories. The straightforward descriptive coding method of Miles and Huberman (1994) was the inspiration for this study's data analysis. Miles and Huberman suggested,

> creating a provisional 'start list' of codes prior to fieldwork. For the purposes of this study, that list was devised from the conceptual framework, list of research questions, hypotheses, problem areas, and/or key variables that the researcher brings to the study. (p. 58)

Because there were very definite social justice themes already delineated in the major research question (i.e., progressive vs. traditional, student engagement, and sense of community), these themes conveniently served as the provisional start list of codes suggested by Miles and Huberman.

Within the start list of codes, various sub-themes already existed, and more could emerged during the research process. Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Miles and Huberman, 1994) discussed various types of "coding procedures later in the study cycle", such as "filling in," "extension," "bridging," and "surfacing" (p. 62). These techniques

are meant to help the researcher negotiate what Miles and Huberman call "codes that emerge progressively during data collection" (p. 62). For example, filling in, extension, and bridging are related to viewing pre-set codes from new perspectives, based on emerging data; surfacing refers to the necessary creation of completely new codes. Miles and Huberman also described the necessity of being able to update codes during the data analysis process. For instance, "clustering" (p. 248) describes the combining of coding categories with similar patterns or characteristics, while "partitioning" (p. 254) refers to splitting codes into two or more specific categories. Several of these actions were necessary during the coding analysis for this study.

Detailed coding process. The researcher started with a provisional list of codes that matched the overall themes central to this study: student engagement (evidence of engagement, content retention, love of education) and sense of community (inclusion, multiple intelligences, multiple perspectives, interpersonal skills, cultural awareness, social consciousness, relevance/real-world connections, inter-/intradisciplinary collaboration), teaching strategies (traditional vs. student-centered vs. progressive/skits), social justice, and work environment (including feelings of autonomy or freedom, pressure to conform, micromanagement, testing, etc.).

It became clear that adding other codes would be necessary to address some of the other topics that were represented in the interview protocol, as well as to give voice to a few totally new themes that were regularly identified in the transcripts. Examples of second-stage codes were safety/sense of belonging and teacher's personal experience during skits (categories derived from sense of community); student choice, future possibilities for use of Saeed's skits, and comparing/contrasting teaching strategies (sub-

fields of teaching strategies); teacher personality and influences (categories under teacher background); modern realities and youth culture (a subsection of teacher philosophy); and brainstorming solutions to problems in education (a totally new category). In addition, two new sub-fields were created from "work environment" due to the frequency with which they were mentioned—testing obsession and district-mandated materials. In addition, some categories were eliminated due to non-use, such as the category of "teacher feelings of autonomy and freedom."

As the transcripts were reviewed a third time, it was decided to divide work environment into two other new categories—negative work environment and system-bucking behaviors, to make multiple intelligences an aspect of inclusion/differentiation, and to create a new category called 'mentoring.' Further, social consciousness and cultural awareness were combined into one category, due to ambiguity of differentiating among some of the experiences related by teacher participants. Teacher mentions of "weirdness" (or similar references) were made into a third-tier code under teacher personality.

A chart was created in Microsoft Word to organize researcher annotations throughout the coding process. As codes evolved, this document was edited to reflect the changes made. The large volume of information gathered over the course of interviews and focus group necessitated the use of this chart in maintaining order during the coding task, as well as in easily visualizing themes that emerged from the analysis. Operational definitions were given to each code to ensure clarity. These operational definitions were noted in the coding chart underneath every code. For example, one code under "Student Engagement" was SE-ee, referring to the operational definition of "evidence of

engagement behaviors such as interest, optimism, focus, passion, attention, comments, etc. during or directly after a lesson." Miles and Huberman suggested that displaying the data in such a way (such as in a chart that makes data easy to visualize) can help the researcher in reaching trustworthy conclusions. Maintaining the utmost organization in the coding process as well as verification via member-checking can help the qualitative researcher be confident about the conclusions drawn (Punch, 2009).

Overall, the coding techniques espoused by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Miles and Huberman, 1994) fit well with the purposes of the study conducted, and allowed the researcher to morph and adapt as was warranted by the data analysis. This enabled a clear, accurate, and realistic portrayal of the teacher participants' stories.

Trustworthiness and Verification

Reliability and validity in narrative inquiry is achieved through trustworthiness (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To foster trustworthiness, all aspects of the analysis were shared, from interview transcripts, to the stories pieced together from transcribed data, to the themes extracted from the stories, with the teacher participants so that they could identify any misinterpretations on the part of the researcher. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) described, "Because collaboration occurs from beginning to end in narrative inquiry, plot outlines are continually revised as consultation takes place over written materials and as further data are collected to develop points of importance in the revised story" (p. 10) They further noted, "Collaboration occurs from beginning to end in narrative inquiry" (p. 11). Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Shenton, 2004) described the ongoing process of having teacher participants collaborate with the researcher in

confirming that their words have been interpreted and explained accurately; they called these "member checks," (p. 68) or verification. Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Shenton, 2004) considered member checks to be "the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study's credibility" (p. 68). To this end, teacher participants should participate throughout the data collection process, from checking the transcripts of the interview dialogue, to verifying researcher interpretation of themes and inferences emerging from the transcripts. Participants may also be asked to contribute explanations for emerging themes or patterns in the data (Shenton, 2004). Miles and Huberman (1994) have utilized member checking techniques in their own research.

Teacher participants were very collaborative and forthcoming during the member-checking process. To put them at ease, it was initially explained that the purpose of collaborating about the transcripts and data analysis was to ensure that I had accurately and fairly interpreted and portrayed their words, perspectives, feelings, and stories. Participants were asked to check transcripts; in addition, it was requested that they freely comment, critique, suggest tweaks, add, or eliminate from their stories so that the research text was truly reflective of their perceptions, experiences, comments, and feelings. Teacher participants and researcher maintained continual contact throughout the entire data collection and analysis process. Overall, teacher participants were pleased with the narratives generated from the data collection and transcription process. Upon reading her narrative, Gwendolyn commented that she believed a good job had been done of telling her story. She agreed with the manifest and latent themes identified in her story. Morton clarified a few minor items, such as adding in details that were unintelligible on the audio recordings before pronouncing, "I believe you have fairly and

accurately interpreted my words and feelings." As he read through his story, he often commented audibly, "So true…" In addition, Morton felt that both the manifest and latent themes generated from his input were very appropriate. Their validation gave this researcher confidence to go forward with further data interpretation and discussion.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed a set of criteria for ensuring trustworthiness of qualitative research. These four criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) are aligned with the standards of traditional scientific research and may help to allay some of the criticism that is sometimes directed at qualitative studies. There are specific "provisions" related to each category that qualitative researchers may undertake to add trustworthiness to their research. Researchers are not bound to use all provisions under each category, but simply to choose the ones that work for them. They can then document to what extent they implemented any of the provisions to add clout to their studies (Shenton, 2004). This research study implemented many of the provisions suggested under Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria, such as: using an established research method, providing an overview of the researcher's "background, qualifications, and experience," implementing "overlapping methods" or triangulation, consulting regularly with dissertation advisor, and thoroughly reviewing the literature related to the study (Shenton, 2004, pp. 71-73). The research timeline is shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Methodological Components and Verification Techniques

Methodological Component	**Intended Analysis Technique**	**Main Verification Technique**
Narrative Self-Inquiry	Descriptive Coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994)	Debriefing with advisor and committee
Narrative Inquiry (Individual Interviews)	Clean transcription of interviews (Elliot, 2005) "Restorying" (Creswell, 2007; Lichtman, 2012) Descriptive Coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994)	Member checking; Debriefing with advisor
Follow-Up Interviews	Clean transcription of interviews (Elliot, 2005) "Restorying" (Creswell, 2007; Lichtman, 2012) Descriptive Coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994)	Member checking; Debriefing with advisor
Focus Group Session	Descriptive Coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994)	Member checking; Debriefing with advisor

Research Question

Questions for the individual teacher interviews were derived from the major research question of this study, which was:

> What are teacher perceptions of Saeed's skits in terms of social justice themes (progressive in nature [i.e., non-traditional], and fostering student engagement and sense of community)?

Eliciting information related to the above research question was the main goal in creating

a list of 12 interview questions for teacher participants (see Appendix A). Some questions included prepared follow-up topics or questions. To elicit maximum input from teacher participants, most interview questions were designed in an open-ended style and in informal language (Creswell, 2007). The questions began by covering the participants' backgrounds and views on social justice, then shifted to their past personal experiences with different types of teaching and learning strategies (i.e., traditional, student-centered/progressive, and skits specifically), how comfortable they felt using skits in the current educational climate, what their personal experiences were like, and finally their perceptions about the various ways that skits may have fostered social justice in their classrooms.

Teacher participants were asked to respond to these questions, if possible, in narrative (story) format, with minimal interruption by the interviewer. A list of pre-planned questions was created, which by necessity were in a particular order; however, Wengraf (2008) suggested that allowing interviewees' responses to be free-flowing and as much of a "solo production of their own" as possible would honor their "lived experience" (p. 3) and avoid unnecessary insertions of the researcher's biases or associations into the teachers' stories. Elliot (2005) concurred, suggesting that interviewers should actively avoid interrupting participants during interview responses so that the natural flow of their stories will not be disrupted. Although the researcher strived for a comfortable, rather informal tone, the interview was semi-structured in nature. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) described semi-structured interviews as those in which researchers generally prepare "a list of questions and prompts to increase the likelihood that all topics will be covered in each interview in more or less the same way" (p. 122).

Individual follow-up interviews served as member-checking sessions for seeking clarification or confirmation on specific questions, or for asking new questions sparked by the original interviews. The focus group session questions, drew upon the outcome of both participants' individual interview analyses. The focus group session was an opportunity for all participants (researcher and teacher participants) to freely discuss similarities and differences among their perceptions regarding skits, social justice, the current state of education, or other topics that were pertinent to this research study. Therefore, focus group questions were created in an impromptu manner depending on the direction of the focus group session. The researcher began the session by seeking more information and clarification regarding the teacher participants' responses to questions about their backgrounds and teaching influences. The remainder of the conversation was allowed to naturally evolve in directions taken by the participants. All teachers freely engaged in discussion about Saeed's skits as well as related topics. As Azzara (2010) explained, because of participant interaction in focus group sessions, latent issues often emerge which would not have been covered in the individual interview questions. This was indeed the case, as teachers showed interest in discussing the numerous issues that remove their autonomy and prevent them from using activities (like Saeed's skits) of their own choosing.

Teacher Participants

Creswell (2012) described the research participant as a person "who can provide an understanding of the phenomenon, [because he or she] has experienced a specific issue or situation (p. 523). This study included two teacher participants who met this description. Attributes the researcher considered necessary for these teacher participants

were:

- Preferably, those who teach secondary American History on an everyday basis;
- Teachers who had experience incorporating my skits into their lessons;
- Teachers who were experienced and certified to teach secondary social studies.

It was relatively easy to identify ideal participants for this study, as the researcher was aware of potential participants who had served in the capacity of colleague with this researcher, either in the same school or different school(s) or as participants in a social studies-related professional conference. These relationships enhanced the research being conducted. As Craig and Huber (2006) noted, "webs of relationships shaped our beginnings as narrative inquirers, forming deep roots within, between, and among us . . . from a relational standpoint, connections such as these offer richness and depth and allow insights that would otherwise not be possible" (p. 255). Indeed, these roots (because of a longstanding professional network) resulted in Saeed's skits being utilized in the potential teacher participants' classrooms, and helped lay the groundwork for this research.

Summary

This research called for a research design that would allow the negotiation of significant complexity. Therefore, for the purposes of this exploratory study of teacher perceptions, autobiographical narratives, interviews, follow-up interviews, and a focus group session were utilized to triangulate, or "go at" the issue from several different angles. A simple and flexible coding strategy (descriptive coding) along with constant

researcher reflection and collaboration with teacher participants helped to ensure thoroughness of the study, maintain ethical considerations, and increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

Chapter IV

"If students aren't learning effectively, it may be because of the persistence of traditional beliefs and practices in our nation's schools."—Alfie Kohn

Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore teacher perceptions on the impact of Saeed's skits on social justice (student engagement and sense of community) in two American history classrooms. The research question underpinning this study was:

1. What are teacher perceptions of Saeed's skits in terms of social justice themes (progressive in nature [i.e., non-traditional], and fostering student engagement and sense of community)?

Through original, follow-up, and focus group interviews, teacher participants shared their perceptions regarding the extent to which Saeed's skits fostered social justice (student engagement and sense of community) in their history classrooms. In addition, participants compared and contrasted Saeed's skits, which fall under "progressive/arts integration" activities, with more traditional and/or other types of progressive/student-centered activities. Finally, participants discussed the conditions in which they work, which either supported or stifled the implementation of progressive/arts-integrative activities such as Saeed's skits.

Research findings were based on a data analysis of the stories of the researcher and two teacher participants. Transcripts of the initial and follow-up interviews with both participants, as well as the focus group interview (which also included the researcher), were read, re-read, and then annotated. Next, transcript data was extracted piece by piece

and woven together into a single, cohesive story or narrative for each participant. These stories were divided into sections that made sense thematically and chronologically and provided for ease of understanding. This "restorying" technique then facilitated the detailed coding/data analysis process (Creswell, 2007). The goal of the coding process was to extract recurring themes relevant to this study's central research question, as well as to identify emerging, relevant themes. These themes will be discussed after the presentation of the narratives.

Background

The same two teacher participants--one male, one female--were involved in three phases of the research process, which included original interviews, follow-up interviews, and a focus group interview. All interviews were transcribed from audio recordings. Both teacher participants identified as 8th grade American history teachers, and both had at least 10 years of experience teaching American and/or Texas History. The two participants currently work in different school districts. Pseudonyms were assigned to both participants, their school districts, their schools, and anyone that may have been mentioned during the interview process. These teacher participants were both selected for this study because they had considerable experience implementing Saeed's skits in their history classrooms, and had expressed interest in sharing their perceptions and experiences.

Teacher Participants

Gwendolyn Sage and Morton Wise have been important in my growth as an educator, because they have allowed me to see my work come even further into fruition. Thanks to them, my skits went from a tool that was successful in just my own classroom,

to being a tool that helped students in other classrooms and even other districts have a better experience in their history classes. Gwendolyn and Morton have stuck by me, both as colleagues and friends, and have continued to use my skits on a regular basis in their history classrooms. Gwendolyn has attended my session at the Region IV Social Studies Conference on an almost yearly basis for approximately the past nine years, and has even overseen an end-of-the-year History Department production at her own school using my work. Morton has used the skits regularly within his own classroom through the past several years, and developed a vision of mixing my skits with modern technology to create a unique format that students can use as a learning tool.

Gwendolyn. My first participant to be interviewed was "Gwendolyn." Gwendolyn had been a middle school American History teacher for 10 years. For the past 10 years, Gwendolyn attended a major social studies conference in Houston, Texas, and repeatedly and purposefully attended my session entitled *"Content-Rich Skits for the History Classroom.."* The second year she attended my session, she made herself known to me and explained that she was attending my session for a second time due to the impact it had on her the previous year. Thereafter, she continued to return year after year, participating in the sessions, asking for my skits, and communicating with me on a frequent basis both professionally and personally. She has informed me that for the past few years, her middle school American History students have used my skits to put on a big end-of-year production, which is a thrilling learning experience for all. Last year, when Gwendolyn transferred to a new school, she expressed to me the sentiment that she was "excited to get to introduce my skits to a whole new set of students." Gwendolyn continues to develop new and innovative ways to implement my skits to promote learning

in her history classroom.

Morton. My second participant to be interviewed is "Morton." Morton has been teaching for 13 years—mostly middle school American History. Morton had experience working closely with a theater arts teacher in the past, and thus, it was seamless for him to pick up Saeed's skits for use in his history classroom. He implemented Saeed's skits into his classroom on a regular basis, and came to enjoy their versatility. We worked together for 3 years, and by the end of that period, Morton was a regular user of Saeed's skits in his history classroom. During the last year, I worked with Morton, he had developed a vision for creating a history department YouTube channel for our students. He imagined a small core group of students that could meet weekly in one of our classrooms. With one (or both) of us as facilitator, these students would perform, record, and post performances of Saeed's skits on this private YouTube channel. All of our students would then be able to access this channel to use the recorded skits as review material. Even though I have moved from the middle school to an Early College High School, Morton regularly makes time to attend a major local social studies conference, where he willingly shares the benefits of my skits as a teaching and learning strategy.

Research Narratives

My Story

At the time of this inquiry, I was in my 14th year of teaching in public schools, but in my very first year teaching AP World History and Sociology at Sovereign Early College High School ("Early College") (pseudonym). For the ten years before this, I taught American (including Texas) History at Coachville Middle School (pseudonym) within the same school district. Concurrently, for most of that time, I taught as an adjunct

professor of sociology at the same local community college that also oversaw the sociology course I taught at the Early College during the inquiry. I currently hold a Masters in Sociology and a Bachelors in Behavioral Science-General (Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology) from University of Houston-Clear Lake, where I was inducted into Alpha Kappa Delta, the international honor society for sociology majors. I currently hold three teaching certifications: 8-12 Social Studies Composite, 4-8 Generalist, and ESL Supplemental. I have been a finalist for my school's Teacher of the Year twice, but I feel that I won the lottery every single year by simply doing what I enjoy.

I am a mom of five beautiful children—4 girls and a boy, ranging from college age to toddler. My oldest child recently graduated with her bachelor's in anthropology, and worked as an osteology lab assistant for one of the most famous anthropologists in the world. She is currently in a master's program in biological anthropology. My second child is in high school, and he shows a proclivity for computers, math, and science. My third child (labeled gifted/talented) is about to start middle school, and, like her mother, is involved in choir. The last two girls are still too young to start school, but already display a curiosity for many subjects. Most of my children share my goofy sense of humor.

Throughout my life, I have always loved school, had a special affinity for my teachers and professors, and have been a conscientious and high-performing student. I can remember very clearly that the people I always held in highest esteem were (besides the artists) the astrophysicists, professor-types and other people with doctoral degrees. For instance, one of my childhood heroes was the renowned Dr. Carl Sagan. I always

told my family that one day I would have a doctoral degree myself. That promise has helped to keep me on track academically through any personal challenges I may have faced over the years, including at one point being a young, single mother.

It just so happens that I am lucky enough to work in the same school district where I received my entire public education, kindergarten through twelfth grade, and graduated with honors from high school in 1991. Notwithstanding the over-testing and micromanagement that seem to be a reality in most school districts these days, including this one, I have been extremely happy serving as an educator in this school district, and I am certain that this personal, long-term history there influences my satisfaction greatly. I feel a profound sense of connection to the students who are spending their childhoods in the same place where I did, and it gives me the sense that I am giving back to my community every single day, just by going to work. In fact, my job does not even feel like work. I often say that this school district has my "life stamp."

Before "returning home" to my current district, I had spent three years in another (adjacent) school district. (This included my first year of teaching.) I would not call my time there happy; this is because I knew in my heart that I had not yet found my niche. Oddly, I knew that I belonged in education, but I just had not found the right place yet. I started out as an eighth-grade English teacher for one year, followed by a two-year stint in elementary (third grade). Although I dearly loved the students, some of whom maintain contact with me today, a personal sense of excitement and passion about my content area was definitely missing.

After finding the man of my dreams, getting married, and having my third child, I decided that I was ready to start teaching again. By this time, I knew that the secondary

level was where I truly belonged. Something inside me told me to go to my old middle school, the one I attended in my childhood—which was only a few miles from where I lived. They always say that when something feels right, there is a certain feeling you get that is just like "home." Well, that was what it felt like when I sat for my interview. I just remember having no nerves whatsoever, being completely myself, and feeling appreciated. I can remember that it did not even matter what they asked me to teach—I would have done it. Honestly, I do not know why I did not apply there from the start. Just as I was pulling in the driveway of my home after leaving the interview, they called to offer me the job. I would be teaching American History!

At first, I felt weird to know that I would be embarking upon a completely new content area that I had never considered teaching, but that feeling soon faded away as I realized that it was quite an appropriate assignment for me. It was perhaps the most appropriate assignment I could have gotten. My dad had always sown an appreciation for history in our house, maintaining a large personal library of mostly history-related non-fiction books (most of which I read), and tending to tell spontaneous tales about historical events. I became excited that I already had a grasp of most of the content—thanks to Daddy—and that I would be able to pass along his love of history to others. My mind started going wild with possibilities.

From the start, my focus was to build upon the vast amount of knowledge I already had, and allow the collaboration with my students (including their questions) to propel me to the next level and become not only extremely knowledgeable, but an expert in the content. I feel I achieved this easily, and my amazing boss (the then-principal of the middle school), Bee Toogood (pseudonym), further supported my efforts. She

nominated me for a spot in a "Teaching American History" federal grant program that was a collaboration between University of Houston, Museum of Fine Arts-Houston, and Region IV Education Service Center. The program's purpose was to train area history educators to become curriculum specialists in American History content. I soon received notification that I was selected to participate, and ended up committing to the three-year program. That program changed my life, because not only did it help me meet my goal of significantly increasing my expertise, but I was able to establish an impressive network of friends and colleagues who had similar goals. It also allowed me to meet the person who later became my doctoral advisor in Curriculum and Instruction-History/Social Education, Dr. Cameron White.

The Teaching American History program, and the doctoral program I later joined because of personal connections I made within it, showed me that, as a teacher, I was already doing a lot of things right. I often opted for alternative texts in place of traditional textbooks, created unique and effective activities, encouraged collaborative learning strategies, built relationships with my students, reached out to the local community, sought ways to make interdisciplinary real-world connections, and did not mind taking risks such as arts integration. The program also highlighted many societal realities that made having these qualities even more important. I began to see much more clearly the social forces that are constantly at play, which work to maintain the status quo--or, more plainly, that work to keep most of my students from meaningfully changing their realities. I began to see many aspects of education in a completely new light; for example, history curricula, standardized testing (including district benchmark tests and "accountability" systems), State Board, political forces (such as the push for

charter schools, including the privatization movement), and nameless powerful entities that hold so much sway over the lives of teachers, administrators, and students.

I realized the importance of teachers being experts in their content areas, because without that expertise they will likely float through school year after school year, well-meaning but completely unaware that all these things are essentially being used as tools to help maintain the privilege of the power elite. I have seen many teachers who are not well-versed in their content areas who rely upon textbooks as if they were Bibles. I believe that deep content knowledge is truly a freeing agent, because it allows teachers the vision to recognize the poor quality and ineffectiveness of many curricula, state tests and district benchmarks, etc., allowing them to focus on finding or creating more effective teaching and learning materials for their own classrooms.

I taught American History for ten years at that same school, and the leadership changed several times. Even though I had to sit through many a "data meeting" discussing numbers mined from benchmark tests (district-made practice tests for the state standardized test, STAAR) that I suspected had not been found to be scientifically valid or reliable, I initially saw the data obsession as simply an unpleasant aspect of the job that I would have to endure. I generally still had the professional leeway to create unique learning environments for my students as I saw fit. However, the sense of professional leeway had gradually declined every year until, during the last year I taught at that school, I hardly implemented my skits at all. It seemed like most teachers were just going to continue lying down and taking it. I noticed that while other teachers may not be quite as passionate as I was about the poor quality of the tests, some still questioned the system and even voiced complaints. However, sadly, many teachers and

administrators had “bought in” to the testing.

In addition, I was aware for many years that some teachers would go farther than others would in “reviewing” students before these constant benchmark tests. Because our district curriculum specialists usually showed the benchmarks to teachers beforehand, teachers would be aware of what questions would be asked. After the tests, students in other teachers’ classes would sometimes let it slip what methods the other teachers would use, from going over the questions and all answer choices verbally beforehand, to placing the test questions on an overhead projector and going over it right before the benchmark, to creating review sheets that were based on the actual test. But as one can plainly see, the conditions for these tests were anything but equal, and therefore the data was compromised. These testing survival tactics were common knowledge, but due to personality differences, some teachers would go all out—while others were terrified of getting in trouble for reviewing the test too closely. This little game made me very uncomfortable . . . and I knew that all this stuff was taking time away from much more meaningful teaching and learning activities, such as Saeed’s skits.

Teacher complaints about district benchmarks, standardized tests, “unit tests”/ “snapshots,” and other data collection tactics (no matter the name) often fall on deaf ears, and over the years I have theorized that scientific illiteracy may be a cause of widespread ignorance regarding testing design, from the state level down to the district level. At the district level, for example, the tests are largely being designed by people who may be qualified in a content area, or in administration, leadership, etc., but not in research and statistics or testing design. Thus, not much thought is given to controlling the testing

environment, which should be of significant concern to anyone attempting to elicit valid and reliable data. In addition, because some teachers rightfully move at varied paces through the material, students inevitably end up being tested on some items they have not learned (which might be avoided if teachers had control over their own tests). Lastly, the composition of students assigned to each teacher varies. Some teachers have more students that tend to do well on these tests, and some teachers have more students who struggle. It is not fair to assign either credit or blame to the classroom teachers based upon these tests (Baker, et al., 2010).

I felt then, and still do, that because schools, administrators, teachers, and students are constantly being judged based on the data mined from these tests, that it is a serious social justice issue. Even more germane to this dissertation, these test-and-data sideshows prevent teachers from using strategies, such as Saeed's skits, that may be much more effective in promoting student engagement and sense of community. A good friend of mine, A. J. Temple (pseudonym), wrote a blog exposing the bias in a released STAAR social studies test; he analyzed each question along with all the answer choices, and provided even further evidence of the unfairness in not only district benchmarks, but state exams as well. Knowing these things makes a teacher like me even more frustrated at the amount of time taken from truly worthwhile activities like my skits.

I also observed that once people were promoted to administration, they seemed to stop questioning the testing data altogether; it seems to be a survival mechanism. Unlike many people, I have never aspired to be in a leadership position such as principal or assistant principal; I knew that my personality was not right for those roles anyway. I would be very highly qualified for a curriculum specialist role; however, I have seen that

people in those positions have become, sadly, little more than data-crunchers thanks to the constant benchmark and standardized testing obsession. I recoil at the very thought of it . . . I even feel sorry for them. I strongly feel that classroom teachers should oversee all assessments for their students, because this would hopefully ensure that the students are tested only over what they have learned. I revel in my joy of "just" being a teacher, and having the privilege of creating materials that may foster student engagement and sense of community in my classroom.

Because of my experiences during that decade teaching middle school American History, I came to have a better understanding of myself, what was important to me in a career, and how to create classrooms that fostered social justice. Although some in my life have tagged me as "unambitious" because I am happy being a teacher, I disagree. I've always placed happiness and job satisfaction above dollar amounts. All my experiences—the good and the not-so-good—contributed to the depth of understanding I have today. One of the most powerful experiences I have ever had was implementing my skits into my own classroom. I am confident that teachers have the most important leadership role there is, facilitating students in becoming lifelong learners, including making curricular connections and becoming active participants in the community—both of which will help them advance in life. I realize that I may not ever be successful in influencing meaningful change in the aspects of education that I do not like, such as overtesting. But, I know for certain that I can continue non-stop to make meaningful change in my classroom by simply being who I am, and that excites me.

Within the past year, I transferred from the middle school, where I spent 10 years of my life teaching American History, to my district's Early College High School.

Because this type of high school operates under its own "blueprint," it is, to some degree, autonomous (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2017). The levels of micromanagement and obsession with over-testing, though still present, are much improved from the middle school and, from what I understand, even the regular high school next door. Fortunately, I found that Ima Straightshooter (pseudonym), my new boss at Early College, is an honest, positive, empowering person who instills trust and confidence in her staff. It has truly been one of my best years as a teacher, even given the adjustment I have had to make to a new content area (AP World History). My creative juices have recently started flowing again, and I look forward to writing a collection of World History skits to lovingly implement into that class just as I have done in my American history class over the past decade. I also have a brand-new puppet show stage and set of puppets, just waiting on me and my students to bring them to life (yes . . . in high school!).

Encroachment upon teacher autonomy is one area for which I have a fine-tuned radar. Public schools seem to be moving towards models that will seek more teacher conformity and group planning. For a creative person like me, "being like everyone else" may as well be the mark of death, and I am very sensitive to attempts to dull my uniqueness. In any case, fellow teachers have often not been very comfortable with my artistic and slightly weird style, which has sometimes made group planning awkward. Unquestionably, my best work comes when I am allowed the space to create lessons by myself. It deeply inspires and excites me when I encounter other teachers who I find to have similar teaching personalities, such as those teachers I will be interviewing as part of this dissertation. I often dream of how education could be if there were more like us.

The ham. As far back as I can remember, I have always been what my dad

termed “a ham.” I was not shy, and it did not matter whether I was in front of one person or a million people. All the world was a stage! Sometimes, the other kids just did not know what to make of me. As an only child, I am sure that my personality was at least somewhat shaped by my profound loneliness and desire for excitement. My dad, an avid non-fiction reader (especially of history and science), had thousands of books, and I picked up and at least partially read every single one of them during my childhood. By the time I entered kindergarten, I had been reading for a couple of years already. Sometimes, my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Slapper (pseudonym), put my already-keen reading ability to good use by sitting me on her rocking chair to read to the class while she went down the hall for coffee. Very early on in my elementary school experience, I was tagged for being tested as “gifted & talented” (G/T). I was soon officially identified as such, and was often sequestered off into another room for a portion of the day in what they called (at that time) “the Excel Program.”

In the Excel Program, I collaborated with a very small group of other G/T kids on creative activities of our own choosing. I remember that these student-led projects were content-rich, and yet riveting and fun all at the same time. For example, in 4th grade, I remember that I and another G/T student named I.M. Ornery (pseudonym), with whom I often clashed, mutually agreed on a book for a project. We chose *Ben & Me* (Lawson, 1988), a children’s book about the life of Benjamin Franklin told through the eyes of a mouse, and created a multi-slide project in which the actual artwork we had drawn was then turned into old-fashioned slides that could be projected on the wall. Looking back, I think this experience probably contributed to my lifelong love of history. Another occasion, I chose the topic of lighthouses for a student-led research project. Many of the

"regular" students appeared to be somewhat jealous of the G/T kids for getting to leave the classroom frequently for what they probably viewed as some sort of fun and games. All in all, the mysterious G/T room, and its emphasis on student choice, likely had an impact on my outlook about what drives student motivation. I can remember very clearly that the students in my classroom would often make remarks to me such as, "You're so weird." Honestly, for the most part, I have always reveled in it.

Around the time of my participation in the Excel Program, I read a fiction book by Norton Juster entitled *The Phantom Tollbooth*. It so captured my imagination that I have remained riveted by it ever since. Even though I was only about 9 or 10 years old at the time, I really believe it forever shaped my feelings on what types of materials can have the most profoundly positive effects on children's engagement in what they are reading or learning (Juster, 1961). Therefore, reading The *Phantom Tollbooth* may very well may have been a seminal event leading to my compulsion to lace non-fictional skits with fictional elements to captivate students and help them enjoy the material. I often purchase this book for children of family and friends.

Naturally, I gravitated toward the arts from elementary school onward. In fourth grade, I played the lead role in a Texas History play, relishing the part with glee. The play centered around me ("Alice"), an Alice in Wonderland-type character, and an armadillo (played by the other fourth grade "ham," Mike). My mother had painstakingly sewn a blue dress with a white pinafore for me, just for the occasion. I remember that after my performance, many people in the audience approached my mother to remark how impressed they were at her little ham's performance. As I transitioned into middle and high school, I excelled in band and choir, racking up numerous medals for clarinet and

voice performances, and often wished I could sign up for theatre arts as well. I could not, simply because there was no space in my schedule. I did not let that stop me; I found ways to participate in theatre arts anyway. For example, I volunteered for the yearly theater arts department "Laugh-O-Gram" initiative, as well as playing in the orchestra pit for the annual theatre arts production at our high school. I most definitely felt a sense of belonging in the arts.

I occasionally played practical jokes on my teachers…and the teachers most likely to be targeted were the ones I liked the most, such as my first-year, round-glasses wearing, curly-haired French teacher, Mr. Hamm Donerly (pseudonym). He was easy to pick on. Once, in high school, I purchased a very realistic-looking wind-up cockroach--it was a granddaddy, and had wings, creepy-looking legs, antennae, and everything. This sucker was what my mom would term "plum scary." I waited inside the door of his classroom as he returned from the teacher lounge. Right as he was about to step over the threshold, I let that thing fly. I thought he was going to trip over his own feet trying to flee from it, although I'm glad he did not. I still get a good laugh thinking about that scene. There were other jokes on other teachers, but I will not spill the beans on those.

My mom really should have won a Nobel Peace Prize. She somehow served as a tutor for many of my scholastic efforts during my K-12 years, even with only a high school education. Many of the things I share with my students today are things she used to tell me--things I know can help students be successful.

For example, she used to tell me to read something as many times as I needed to, because "anyone can miss something in the first reading" and "it won't hurt anything to read it again." I often share that advice with my students by reminding them that reading

is like watching a movie; when they watch a movie a second or even third time, there are always things they had not noticed on the first viewing. This way, the students do not feel self-conscious or that there is anything wrong because they needed to read something again. My mom also counseled me about the importance of turning in presentable work, from not turning in paper with curled-up ends, to ensuring that it was neat and free of correction marks like scratch-outs. When it came to quality of student work, she set the standard high—and I pass that along to my students as well. How my mom could figure out algebra, I will never know, but she somehow would always find ways to help me solve difficult homework problems. It is one mystery that may never be solved.

On many an occasion, she would venture out for late-night jaunts for whatever project supplies I had forgotten until the last minute to tell her I needed . . . for the next day. Yet another contribution she made to my education was simply being there . . . being available and nearby at all times, from being room mother in kindergarten to being a Band Booster Club telephone chairperson in high school. For whatever goofball qualities (like my dad) that she lacked, she more than made it up in many other ways. Furthermore, she was integral through most of my college years in helping to care for my children while I continued my education.

In community college, as a music major, I continued making myself a part of the arts scene. I played soprano saxophone in the jazz band and sang in the choir, even being voted choir vice president. However, I eventually realized that I was a music major only because I loved performing, not because I wanted to teach music. Because performance artists often live life "audition to audition", I begrudgingly decided to change majors; however, I never did lose my love of performing. My friend and San Jacinto College

North Choir Director, Dr. Rich Tenor (pseudonym), encouraged me to audition for the Houston Symphony Chorus (official chorus of the Houston Symphony Orchestra).

I later auditioned for the Houston Symphony Chorus, and was accepted. I have hardly ever been as excited about anything as I was to receive that phone call. I spent one glorious "musical season" (one year) with the chorus, even once traveling with the chorus to Mexico City for a performance. Because of my position in the Houston Symphony Chorus, I was also afforded the opportunity to work with a Grammy-winning musical legend in classical music, Robert Shaw, before he died. Mr. Shaw conducted a joint Houston Symphony Chorus and University of Houston Chorus performance at the opening of Moores School of Music. It was truly an honor. I finished out the season but did not re-audition (for reasons of family, work, and educational responsibilities). I frequently reminisce about that amazing year, and I am very grateful for that experience. Of course, the experience further solidified my belief in the transformational power of the performing arts.

Later, I became a middle school teacher, and eventually found the perfect outlet for my creative urges when I discovered how much fun I had creating music and arts-infused teaching resources for my history students, for use in my classroom. I certainly could see the dramaturgical aspect to almost anything, and it did not matter, really, what subject it was. You could say that I learned through drama. It is almost as if my pattern of thinking naturally evolved into a humor-infused script format. I always had an easy time coming up with imaginary conversations into which facts about various subjects could be woven. Naturally, because I saw the world through this lens, I assumed that other people might enjoy learning through drama as well. So, upon becoming a history

teacher, it was not long before I started churning out skits on various topics to help my students learn…and I had assumed correctly. My students loved the skits!

Frequently, I would be lying in bed and would pop up suddenly, having had a random idea for a skit. I'd want to jot the ideas down immediately, as I was afraid I would not remember them otherwise. Starting from those ideas, I would build skits that were not only informative, but funny. Before long, I had dozens in my collection. Some of my popular skits over the years have been:

- *John Smith: The Jamestown Enforcer*—A group of lazy colonists are lying around doing nothing, still pining away for the gold they haven't found. All of a sudden, a loud, stern, dictator-like John Smith arrives on the scene and orders the bums to get up off their behinds, because "if they don't work, they shall not eat…" In the end, Native Americans show up and surround the colonists.
- *Temperance Throwdown* (see Appendix B)—Circa 1840, a trio of guys are hanging out in a bar, drinking it up and talking about how happy they are to be getting a break from their wives. All of a sudden, three temperance movement protesters, one of whom happens to be the wife of one of the unfortunate gentlemen, bust into the bar with protest signs ("Liquor is Evil," "Wine Busts Up Families," "Down with Beer," etc.). The unlucky husband dashes quickly under the table to hide. The wife figures out that someone is under the table, and ends up confronting her husband. In the end, after the women protesters leave the bar, the guys regroup and decide to stock up on liquor because "knowing those females, they'll get their way and all liquor

will be banned." And, of course it is.

- *Worthless*—During the Articles of Confederation period, all 13 colonies printed their own currency, which led to trade conflicts. Well, a guy from Georgia finds himself in Rhode Island, and stops by the Old Tyme Colonial Bathroom Supply to purchase a new toilet seat. The shop owner won't sell him a toilet seat because they don't take Georgia currency. After some haggling and a long monologue detailing the problems with the Articles of Confederation, the shop owner reluctantly agrees to accept the customer's wife in exchange for the toilet seat. As the husband exits the shop with his cast iron toilet seat, the wife shouts at him that he is as "worthless as Georgia currency in Rhode Island."

I want my students to not only experience humor, but to take away truths (content) from my skits. After using these as well as many other skits in my classroom, all of which I authored myself, students are able to discuss the topics of the skits in much more depth and even move beyond the events described in the skit with more ease. Coincidentally, the students have never had any difficulty separating the fictional elements from the factual content in the skits.

I think I inherited my dad's sense of humor because it has manifested itself frequently in my skits. My mom says that when my dad first asked her out on a date, he showed up at her door holding a dead rat (by its tail) in his hand. She should have known right then that she had a goofball on her hands! When I was a young child, my dad would crack jokes that, to me, were hilarious . . . while other people (even family members) were left scratching their heads. Today, I not only share my dad's love of playing

practical jokes and incessant reading, but also spicy food, combinations of dark chocolate and coconut, fried oysters, UFO stories, and much, much more. Possibly the most important trait I inherited from Daddy is the weird sense of humor, because it comes alive in the activities I create for my history students.

One of my fondest memories is of my dad drawing faces on photos of people in the local newspaper, creating his own captions and sometimes even his own story. He would call me in to look at his creations, and we would both laugh gleefully. Later, in my "tween" years, I remember using family photos to put together my very own version of *"National Enquirer"* magazine, except that my stories were even more wild and peculiar--if you can believe that--and my own family members were the pretend "celebrities" (National Enquirer, n.d.). One incident that stands out is the time I took a photo of my long-suffering Aunt Gay (she was always willing to appease me) in front of a *Star Trek* poster (Star Trek, n.d.). I used bright, 1980s-style blue eye shadow with which to paint her entire face, and then took a picture of her sitting in front of the poster. Of course, she became the subject of a wild story in my "magazine." Dad always seemed to appreciate the good laugh I provided. Those were good times.

Another time, there was a commercial, the details of which are fuzzy now, but it featured a man on a luge. I only remember that whatever product they were selling had absolutely nothing to do with luge, making it a completely absurd choice of theme. My dad would pretend to be the guy on the luge, mimicking his position and facial expressions. For unknown reasons, it would send us both into what I like to call "giggle fits." On another occasion, we sat watching a televangelist named "Benny Hinn" blow on people, who would then fall over, apparently unconscious, in supposed "healings."

The spectacle and drama of it all would cause the two of us to laugh until our sides literally hurt. Sometimes, we would play-act these scenes in the kitchen, and send ourselves into humor-induced euphoria (Hinn, n.d.).

When it came to movies, my dad was fond of the comedy genre, opting for choices like *Airplane!* or *Spaceballs* (which he would watch repeatedly, with no decrease in delight). (Davison & Abrahams, et al., 1980; Brooks, 1987). Daddy was also always fascinated with the acting performances in the movie *The Shining* (the version with Jack Nicholson and Shelley Duvall), and, in particular, the "bartender scene" (Kubrick, 1980). He and I would often act out this scene at the kitchen table (I would be the bartender, "Grady"/"Lloyd," and he would be "Mr. Torrance"). Daddy would often insert lines from these movies randomly into conversations (after finding some silly parallel between the subject matter of the discussion and a movie scene)—a habit that I unsurprisingly also find in myself. I have been known to apply random lines from *Nacho Libre* seamlessly into conversation (Black & Klawans, et al., 1980). For example, if one of my family is experiencing a challenge, I may quip, "Summon your eagle powers!" Or, if one of them is annoying me, I may humorously remark, "Get that corn outta my face." This behavior does appear to be contagious; family members will often reply to my comment with yet another perfectly-placed line from the same movie.

Yet another aspect of Daddy's silliness was his love for a local specialty gag gift store, "Pepper Joe's Fun Shop", described as the "go-to shop for the weird and wacky" (MacDonald, 2009). I can remember a small peach-colored voice box he had bought at this store, which would play the sound of incessant (and somewhat obnoxious) laughter when the button was pushed. Upon hearing the recording, without fail, we

would both start laughing like hyenas, as if we had "caught" the laughter bug. That weird little toy never got old. It is hilarious to think back and remember the reactions of my mom to this type of toy; she just did not "get it", which often made my dad and I laugh even harder. She would quip pointedly (with a smirk), "Tell that thing to shut up."

Dad also had a proclivity for the cartoon section of the Sunday newspaper, and you could bet that the absolute weirdest cartoon strips would be the ones that tickled his funny bone the most. Likewise, I have a fondness for cartoons like *Bizarro* (Piraro, n.d.), *F-Minus* (Carrillo, n.d.), and others that many people might find odd. Parallel to what happened during my childhood, I might find these cartoons side-splittingly funny, while others are often left utterly baffled.

In seventh grade, I had a math teacher who responded to one student's repeated daily question with the exact same daily response. The student would say, "Ms. McTidy (pseudonym), do we HAVE to do this assignment?" Her "pat" response: "No. Uh-uh. You don't got to do nothing. Only if you want credit." I found this humorous, and would often imitate Ms. McTidy and the student by trying to reenact the exchange at home. My dad apparently loved it, and would often ask me, "Hey, Sheryl, do Ms. McTidy again." So, I would carry out the imitation performance, and I would enjoy seeing my dad's delighted reactions.

One more example: as a young girl, I often accompanied my mom to the grocery store. The store we frequented would use bright, neon orange stickers to differentiate their varieties of ground beef ("ground sirloin," "ground round," "ground chuck", etc.). During each visit, I would delight in attempting to remove one of the "ground round" stickers and place it square upon my mother's backside. At the time, it was the most

hilarious thing in the entire world! She became aware that I would try this, and would actively monitor to prevent it from happening. But, I was too skilled. Inevitably, I would always find a way to put the sticker on my mom's rear end, somehow catching her while she was distracted by something else. My poor mom would then promenade unwittingly through the rest of the store with a glowing "ground round" sticker blazing on her behind for all to see. I would walk behind her, giggling to myself, and trying not to do it so loudly that she would be tipped off. One day, a gentleman who happened to be in the store, with a smirk on his face, approached my mom to advise her that "Ma'am, I think someone is playing a joke on you" (as he shifted his eyes playfully towards her young daughter . . . me). This story became family legend, and it is not difficult to guess that it was my dad who enjoyed it most of all.

I was surely conditioned that humor equates to a positive experience, and I credit my dad for that. The thing that tops it all off is the fact that my dad was immensely interested in history, and would relate history stories to me from a young age . . . always told with his typical animated, humorous style. No doubt, it had a huge impact on me. The reason I believe this aspect of my life is important for my reader to know is that it planted a seed that later gave me the tools with which to address a problem I experienced in my classroom.

Imagining history through skits. Today, I find myself doing basically the same animated, humorous things Dad used to do, except mostly with historical figures. I imagine the conversations they might have, the hang-ups they might have hidden from the world, the personalities that contributed to the making of our nation—and, without a doubt, the funny things they might have said or done behind the scenes. For example, in

one of my most recently created skits, King George reads colonists' angry letters bemusedly while sitting on the "throne"—the toilet. (The "letter" would be written by one of my students from the perspective of a colonist angry over British taxation. I would choose the most hilarious one to integrate into the skit.) In another skit, *Mo' Sugar, Mo' Problemz*, a typical Massachusetts husband and wife have a serious discussion about the ramifications of the 1764 British tax on colonial sugar; however, the last two lines of dialog invariably cause the entire class to erupt in gleeful laughter:

"Well, until then, we gotta figure out how to get our sugar."

"Well, my love. I got a little sugar right here…"

My entry into the world of skit-writing was originally necessitated by my disappointment in the published skits that were already available to history teachers, and my desire to make them more interesting and fun for all involved. With my unique sense of imagination, I am able to create one-of-a-kind learning tools for my students. I often incorporate aspects of popular culture into my skits, to the delight of my students—and doing this provides unexpected and humorous twists in the material that keep them interested. I have never found other activities on the market that are similar to mine. Around 2008, I found that I had found a comfortable niche in writing history skits for my classroom that integrated facts along with humorous fictional elements. I started creating them on a regular basis, and before long, had a collection. These skits transformed my teaching. I noticed that the skits I created had a pattern: they included a mixture of facts and fiction laced with humor. They had broad appeal among my students and, as others began pointing out, had similarity to other effective forms of media, such as political cartoons and "comedy news" shows.

My first skit, in 2008, was *John Smith: The Jamestown Enforcer*. I knew that the story of early Jamestown could be much more interesting than it was portrayed in the student textbook. I felt that an opportunity was missed to "play up" the story in such a way that it was more relatable to the students. At the beginning of the skit, students were already delighted enough; however, when the preposterously loud and arrogant John Smith character (who I usually assign to a student with the opposite personality for irony's sake) enters the classroom shouting like a drill sergeant at the lazy colonists, there is magic in the room. I noticed that after using this skit in class, students rarely missed test questions on the topic of Jamestown. In addition, many students genuinely wanted to engage in discussion about the topic. I could tell that they really understood what they had learned, and were excited about it. Because I had used the Jamestown skit to introduce the topic (i.e., at the beginning or "hook" part of the lesson), and noticed that they seemed to understand the remaining material more easily, this became the standard way that I utilized my skits in the classroom: to introduce new topics. On occasion, I also use skits as a fun way to wrap up a lesson. In addition, I have used skits as alternative texts, as focused tutoring or review tools for specific topics, or as a springboard or model from which students can author their own skits.

I have done a lot of thinking about the process I go through to create my skits. When I read boring textbook passages, for some reason my mind naturally inserts humor where it was lacking, and amplifies weirdness where it has been minimized or downplayed. I believe it may be similar to the reading phenomenon in which the human brain is still able to decipher words from which the vowels are completely removed (Frost, 1995). This characteristic of my personality has seamlessly allowed me to

continue creating new skits year after year. Another aspect that is crucial to my skit writing is that I have a true interest and passion for getting to know long-dead historical figures as people, and it gratifies me to bring them to life for my students. Once, a student told me, "Mrs. Saeed, you talk about these people as if they are still alive." I took that as a compliment!

Around the same time that I wrote *John Smith: The Jamestown Enforcer,* my husband was in the middle of his second year of teaching sixth grade world cultures. He asked me to write a skit that would help his students understand the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). I created a brief skit, *Let's Talk NAFTA,* that utilized a "talk show" format to incorporate several different viewpoints on this controversial trade policy, and my husband subsequently implemented it into his lesson plan. Later, as we debriefed at the dinner table, I could clearly see that he had a very positive experience; I could tell by the way he described classroom events that a fun learning time was had by all and that his students could easily grasp the ramifications of NAFTA at a much deeper level. The experience of my husband and his students solidified in my mind that I was onto something very meaningful with my unique classroom skits.

The social justice element. Increasing accessibility of the content I teach is bound up with everything I represent, and I believe that teachers can make strides towards social justice by focusing on their very own classrooms. Critical pedagogy, a central component of my doctoral program, is a method of teaching and learning focused on facilitating students in overcoming the amorphous forces that hold others down to maintain the status quo for themselves. What this program means to me is that to be a truly great teacher, one must be fully awake to these amorphous forces to be able to

overcome them. This includes knowing that everything you do, everywhere you go, everyone you encounter, and everything you use with which to teach in the field of education has a political component that helps fulfill the agenda of the group that is already in power. Therefore, a real teacher needs to be a partner with students in learning to see through the fog of all these various agendas and to become empowered critical thinkers. Only when this is achieved can students meaningfully learn the content and move to the next level of understanding. To summarize, I believe that my skits help to provide all students in my classroom equitable access the content they are supposed to learn, and that this is the necessary foundation that must be in place before they move to the next level of understanding and become empowered critical thinkers.

My classroom is a microcosm of the world and the universe. By using my skits to teach history, I feel that I am creating a critical pedagogical sense of justice and equity in my classroom that can ripple out into that universe. I feel confident that I am doing my part, however small, to attempt to divert others away from a path of suffering and onto a path of enlightenment. The reason I believe I am helping to route my students onto a "path of enlightenment" is that before my students will earn the ability, via education, to change their circumstances and that of their families, they must first develop content knowledge and critical thinking.

Skits "effectively deliver" the content ("medicine," if you will) to a wide variety of learners. In addition, the often-complicated points of view and motivations of historical characters are made clear through skits, enabling students to deeply understand the causes and effects of historical events. Students begin to realize the similarities that exist between the peoples of past and present, including people they may have

encountered in their own lives. The students take away a much more nuanced perspective from a skit than they could from a textbook. Students often have a list of questions for me after skits, including many "what ifs," and this tells me that their "sense of wonder" was piqued (Saeed, 2016; p. 2). In addition, I have witnessed my students consistently acting in tandem with one another, with teamwork and glee, as they ask repeatedly to perform my skits in class. Even more amazingly, they take the enthusiasm with them when they leave the classroom, often returning to ask if they can come join another class in the fun. It means a lot to me to create for my students this kind of excitement about American history—and they deserve nothing less.

In short, I believe that implementing skits in my classroom is an act of love, or as Paolo Freire so beautifully described it, an act of "radical love" that helps me fulfill my destiny as a teacher perpetually on a quest for social justice (as cited in Kincheloe, 2005, p. 3). By appealing to students' emotions and sense of fun, giving them multiple perspectives, and the information necessary to form their own thoughts on a historical event, they experience a sense of power they may have never felt before. All my students get to feel like geniuses in their own right. In short, students will never reach critical consciousness without first being able to access the content they are supposed to learn.

Critical pedagogist bell hooks (1994) theorized that students are more than capable of breaking through ideological barriers that have prevented them from "knowing", but to help facilitate this, teachers must eschew the worldviews that typically keep educators bound to teach in the same old ineffective ways (including overreliance upon textbooks, rote memorization, lecture, etc.). She resolutely encourages teachers

to find new ways to teach that not only transform consciousness and fosters an "atmosphere of open expression." In my experience, students' understanding of the content is profoundly increased by the skits, and this increased understanding leads to more sophisticated discussions in which every student in the classroom then has something to contribute to the classroom learning community. I enjoy helping all my students feel empowered in this way. My skits help me to make my vision of social justice a reality within my own classroom.

My vision of social justice. Undoubtedly, my idea of social justice has been influenced by the great social education thinkers like Paolo Freire. It was also influenced by my mom, who, as the second-oldest of 9 siblings raised in poverty by a single mother, was especially sensitive in ensuring that all kids in her care were treated the same.

Social justice to me is love. And to me, love means that no one is left out. That means that every student in my class needs to feel cared for. And for that to happen in the context of learning history, then ALL my students need to feel that what they are learning in my class is somehow important to them personally and that their presence there is wanted and needed. Social justice also means that I am willing to take natural human differences into consideration when it comes to teaching and assessing students. Standardized tests assume that we are all the same and can all fit into the same box. This is a falsehood; we are all different, with varying strengths, weaknesses, and talents. However, different does not mean "less than."

Because of my strongly-held belief in quantum principles, as well as my background in critical pedagogy, I am confident that by using my skits to foster content knowledge and a love of history, I am contributing to my students' ability to not only

change their circumstances and that of their families, but to become more conscious of the world or universe at large, as well as their integral role in it.

Bringing joy back into teaching. "Using (these) skits has really made a huge difference in the sheer delight that I personally experience as a classroom teacher. There have been times that I have had so much fun using these skits with my students that the hours seem to simply fly, and before I know it, the end of the day has arrived" (Saeed, 2016, p. 3). It is very rewarding to sit in the back of the classroom and watch the delight that students have acting out a skit; furthermore, it is simply amazing how their understanding is evident in the discussions we hold afterward . My skits help me to regularly fulfill what has long been my teaching philosophy: "learning should be fun" (p. 1).

Student engagement & sense of community. Over the years, while implementing my skits in the classroom, I have witnessed student engagement like I have never seen before. Furthermore, no other activity I have ever used has provided this level of student engagement or feeling of togetherness in my classroom. Once, I had students answer on an informal classroom survey whether they felt that skits helped them learn. I saved several of their responses, and look at them often:

- "The skits help me learn by putting it into a fun, creative way. No other teachers have made anything about history so fun. It helps me learn and makes me laugh. It's like you're having a conversation with another person." (R.V., student)
- I like the skits because (they) give me an interesting way of learning. I remember things best when I'm interacting or laughing . . . Mrs. Saeed is best at this because she has a wide imagination. Skits (are) helpful because (they) explain the main idea and many important characteristics." (T.W., student)

- The skits help me A LOT! (They) help me because when you mix fun and learning together . . . it keeps me more (awake) rather than reading out of a textbook. It's easy to remember something when you have a funny memory attached to the information." (A.S., student)

I have seen evidence of student engagement in other ways as well. There has hardly been a time when I've implemented one of my skits when students did not beg to "do it again." In addition, students often compete for character roles that they want; if they do not get their desired role the first time, they will ask to do the skit again so that they can. Students also frequently meander into my classroom later in the day after doing a skit, snooping to see how the other class's skit is going . . . and often asking to stay. I have had to lovingly tell many students "No" for trying to get out of another important core class so that they could stay in my class to participate in skits (although inside, it made me feel pretty great).

My students remembered information better after experiencing skits. For example, one of my skits, *Big Bad John*, helped students to remember specific provisions of the Magna Carta. It resulted in them performing better on a test question related to the Magna Carta's influence on the development of representative government in America. In addition, after my skit entitled *Dealin' Wit' A Dictator*, students could name all the convention resolutions that Stephen F. Austin presented to Santa Anna in Mexico City.

After skits, the level of discussion is much, much deeper than it would be after a simple textbook reading, or even after a group activity. The students seem to easily pick up character motivations and points of view from my skits, which makes the discussions rich and meaningful. They also made real-world connections, often being willing to

contribute to class discussions afterwards with frankness and seriousness. For example, my skit *Temperance Throwdown* once sparked a discussion about the viewpoints of those who wanted to continue having access to alcohol and the perspectives of the women who protested it. Some students surprised me during these discussions, bringing in personal family situations involving alcohol that had presented serious challenges for their own families. Of course, I then added to the conversation with by relating my own experience of being a child affected by alcoholism. This way, the lesson about temperance could take on a whole new level of importance for the students. It was especially intriguing that given the amount of humor in the skit, it was still able to elicit a significant level of relevant serious discussion afterward.

By using my skit, no longer was the temperance movement just a paragraph in a textbook, but it had relevance for them personally. In addition, it created an opportunity to bond with my students, building a sense of community and trust. After these skit-supported lessons, students appeared to have a much better grasp of the information, and could recognize the concepts covered in the skits when they encountered them on tests and quizzes. One example of increased content retention and comprehension that I recall is related to my hilarious skit *Worthless*, which depicts an imagined scene of colonial chaos during the Articles of Confederation period. The students were almost euphoric, begging to do the skit over and over. I had students negotiating with each other over character roles in the skit, telling each other things like, "Let me do it this time, and next time you can play it." I finally had to stop them for a short quiz. Typically, the Articles of Confederation period is considered one of the more "boring" topics in American history class, which often resulted in complete misunderstandings of information. Not

this time. It was truly amazing how *Worthless* helped them understand the concepts for that quiz.

Working together in inter- or intradisciplinary fashion seems to always come up at teacher workshops and conferences; however, in real life, it is sometimes difficult to attain. One of the most meaningful partnerships I've ever had as a teacher was with a theatre arts teacher by the name of Matt Gunn (pseudonym). I approached him during faculty in-service and introduced myself. I told him about my skits and about my vision of collaborating with theatre arts, and proposed that we try to work together that year. It turned out to be a beautiful teaching partnership! For five consecutive years after that first meeting, he became my co-presenter at the Region IV Social Studies Conference. I presented my skits, and he brought in his own "theatre arts teacher perspective" to discuss helpful ways to implement skits in a history classroom. Sadly, I often wonder if we had tried to collaborate to that same extent today, would still be able to get away with it?

I strongly believe that the emphasis on state standardized tests, district-mandated benchmarks/"unit tests"/"snapshot" tests, forced content-area group planning sessions ("common planning"), and mandatory "Professional Learning Communities" (PLCs) have all had a detrimental effect on educators' professional autonomy. I feel that their ability to not only to create unique individual lessons that are reflective of their knowledge and personalities, but also to collaborate in an interdisciplinary capacity, have been compromised. Many teachers, like myself, want to collaborate…they really do; however, oftentimes PLCs are just another place where teachers are told to conform. The desire to collaborate needs to be from the teachers' own heart, not contrived or forced by

administrators.

The collaboration that I had with Matt Gunn did not stop at the social studies conference; it extended into day-to-day school life. If I was in the middle of a unit, Matt would have no problem with using one of my skits in his theater arts classroom, which was invaluable in supporting what the students were learning in history class. In addition to his theater arts expertise, Matt had extensive knowledge of American History, and became like my unofficial co-teacher without our even being together in the same classroom. On occasion, Matt would surprise my students by showing up to my classroom dressed like Stephen F. Austin, a Native American, or even Thomas Jefferson. I remember that even the so-called "hard-to-reach" students were delighted. Days or weeks later, students would still ask me, "When is Mr. Gunn coming again?"

It was a partnership I fear I might never have again, as Matthew moved to another school district; moreover, standardized testing accountability, and the circus that accompanies it, seems to have risen to whole new levels. Nonetheless, I have not lost sight of my dream of seeing collaborations like this become commonplace, even with the micromanagement that often characterizes the current educational environment.

For most years that I worked at the middle school, I was one of three 8th grade history teachers. During that time, my skits were often used freely in the other two teachers' classes as well as mine. We used them in all different ways, including beginning, middle, and end of lessons, reviews, and supplemental tutoring activities. The skits helped maintain a positive environment, and were considered a "go-to" activity. On days when some classes were ahead of other classes, we used the skits as "useful fillers" that helped us keep classes on track while still providing student engagement and sense of

community. Teamwork and sharing was greatly promoted, as classes often wanted to watch other classes perform the skits. It was wonderful to watch our students be excited about a content-based learning activity, even if it was designed to be fun. This continued until the last few years that I worked at the middle school.

A former principal, Bob Triplet (pseudonym), was fully aware of my longstanding and ongoing relationship with the theater arts department. Very astutely, he assigned me to be the new teacher mentor of a first-year theater arts teacher. While others expressed surprise at this choice, it was perfect in my mind. I saw it as an acknowledgement of my hard work and interdisciplinary collaboration that he would consider me to be her mentor, even though it was not typical (since I was a history teacher). I served as her mentor for two years, and it was an honor to do so.

The skits I've developed have proven to be especially useful for English Language Learners, who are often not ready (or are perhaps intimidated by) more academic-language texts at the beginning of their language-learning journeys. With fun and user-friendly skits, these students can simultaneously access the required content, practice speaking conversational English, and can meaningfully participate in the classroom community. Skits written in conversational tone (BICS, or Basic Interpersonal Conversational Skills) can be put to good use in venues such as "New Arrival Centers" (NAC), where students are just starting to learn English ("English Language Learner" sub-populations, or ELL) as well. [NAC is a special classroom where students who have recently arrived in the country are helped to become acclimated into the American school system, and learning English is a big part of the program.] Students of a second language often are comfortable using BICS-based conversation long before they are ready for texts

filled with academic jargon. Skits like mine can ensure that these students have access to the necessary core-area content.

In 2012, at the request of the New Arrival teacher at a middle school in a suburban district in northeast Houston, my skits were incorporated into the New Arrival Center social studies curriculum. The then-teacher, Joe Lingo (pseudonym), requested permission to use these skits to meet his English Language Learner students "where they are" and allow them to fully participate in class. According to Joe:

> Teaching the new arrival students can be a challenge, especially when teaching them history. Not only is language an obstacle but getting the students to connect to American history can be difficult. Incorporating these skits allows the students an opportunity to actively participate in learning. It also allows for deeper discussion; for example, character's intent (why they acted a certain way or made a certain decision). For English language learners, the skits give them an opportunity to practice pronunciation and inflection. It also incorporates conversations and interaction centered around an academic topic.

Although language learning is the most obvious benefit, most studies suggest that about 80% of communication is non-verbal; skits may facilitate the growth of this aspect of communication as well (Mehrabian, 1972).

As the research (and Joe Lingo's story) indicates, skits, dialogues, and role-plays have a crucial place in the ELL environment. Skits using BICS are a blessing for students who are in the sometimes-daunting process of language acquisition. Skits

reinforce conversational English and provide a low-stress, fun environment in which to practice speaking. Skits also support acquisition of English vocabulary words in their proper context, as well as promote interaction with other people. Finally, skits expose ELL students to a variety of cultures and viewpoints.

My favorite way to use my skits is as a "hook" or preview before a lesson. However, I also frequently use them during or after a lesson, or for review. However, I have kept a list of some possibilities for how I might branch out and use them in new ways. One idea is to have students write their own skits in a similar style as my own, according to a provided rubric. Groups of 4 or 5 students could create their own, and perform them for the class. Another idea would be to use Saeed's skits to help make community connections. Students could perform them for elementary students as well as middle or high school students, for parents and community members at school functions, etc. In addition, students could perform Saeed's skits at senior citizen homes or for retired or disabled veterans. Yet another idea could be to provide students with a partially-written Saeed's skit, and allow small groups of students to write the missing portion, then perform for the class. It would be interesting to see how the student groups uniquely envisioned the missing skit scene. The possibilities with Saeed's skits are truly endless.

Teaching strategies I typically use. Of course, I use Saeed's skits with love and on a frequent basis. In addition, I like to use many other arts-integrative activities, including, but not limited to: rap songs, poetry, puppet shows, drawing, cartoons, and more. I also have a proclivity activity for discussion-based activities, ELA-integrative activities, and videos (scaffolded with notes and discussion). I created my own

collaborative group reading strategy, and I use that frequently in my class to analyze primary source documents and other readings. It helps struggling readers feel like they have support by being able to participate in reading and annotation as part of a group, while still having individual responsibilities to fulfill. I also like to use electronic games like *Kahoot* and *Jeopardy*. Sometimes, I use computer-based activities as well.

Personal research quest. Obviously, I am going into this research with a bias towards arts integration. I have a strong performing arts background, and have used arts integration extensively in my own classroom for many years. One of the major goals of my research is to effect change by demonstrating to history educators, administrators, and even state officials the effectiveness of arts integration in creating a socially just and joyous learning environment. I have already described in detail my belief, corroborated by a review of the research, that arts integration, such as with Saeed's skits, fosters an environment of social justice in the classroom and that this may help spread social justice to the larger society via those students who experience it. Unfortunately, teachers who might choose to implement creative activities like Saeed's skits might very well encounter roadblocks in doing so.

Current educational climate. Every school and district has its own unique ways of doing things that affect the teachers and their autonomy. In many cases, teachers may be told what or how to teach, which could squelch their desire or ability to implement activities such as skits. For example, different teachers will go further than others in implementing something akin to arts integration, because they realize they are being watched and micromanaged by administrators and others. Even with the existence of these common obstacles, my two teacher participants had somehow been able to

implement skits on a regular basis in their classrooms, at least up until recently, and I realized the great opportunity I had to understand how they were able to accomplish it.

After some thought (and acknowledgement that I am certainly not a neutral agent), I concluded that I wanted to first know about the teachers—their backgrounds, personalities, education, and teaching experience. I also wanted to understand the situations in which these teachers had been working. I wanted to gauge the level of happiness, the level of professional freedom, and the level of difficulty in incorporating activities on an individual (as opposed to group) basis. I wanted to understand whether the teachers were under pressure to conform to what other history teachers were doing in their classrooms, or to a district "scope and sequence" and/or state curriculum standards (including increasing encroachment upon teacher autonomy and constant monitoring by so-called "instructional coaches" whose main task appears to be monitoring mined testing data). I wanted to hear descriptions of their classroom environments and what the environment is like when various teaching and learning methods are being used in the classroom: traditional, student-centered, and skits. I desired to see if there was a meaningful difference in the classroom environment when skits were incorporated into the lessons. Moreover, I was interested in seeing what about these teachers made them willing to try the skits. I was also intrigued to understand how the teachers' individual experiences were affected by using the skits. Most importantly, I yearned to explore how the skits may have improved social justice in these teachers' classrooms in terms of student engagement and sense of community.

I consider myself to hold a criticalist value orientation, and I share a common worldview with other "criticalists"; namely, that society is infected by inequality, that the

standard ways of doing things usually reinforces this inequality, that oppression is not always overt and is often hidden under the cover of something healthy or wholesome, and that because of these unfortunate and enduring realities, it is therefore absolutely necessary for researchers hoping to effect change to use their platforms to "engage in social criticism" (Given, 2008). For example, the current obsession with testing, data, and accountability has been marketed as if it will somehow hold public schools accountable and spur them to improve, when it often just punishes poor schools and rewards rich ones (Tanner, 2016). My hope is that my research will help improve educational trends towards testing, conformity, and micromanagement…and I acknowledge that this worldview may have a major impact on my research. It is my hope that my research will be an important contribution to the field of education, and that it may at least begin to start a conversation about how we could do things differently in terms of meeting students "where they are" and helping them be successful academically. I would love to see teachers become more empowered to spend their time planning activities, like Saeed's skits, that will instill both student engagement and a sense of community.

Even though I was not aware of it at the time, this project was born the second I decided to take action and write my own skits to help my students have an improved experience in my history class. It is truly my life's work . . . my passion. I have reflected upon what happened that led up to that first skit-writing endeavor, and I have realized how deeply my path has been profoundly guided by certain significant others (such as my father). I realized that even one person can have a life-altering, positive impact on someone else's life, and that in turn, an infinite number of other people can benefit.

Because of their position working with children, teachers have seemingly unlimited opportunities to affect this type of broad social change. I would like to conduct this research to get a more complete picture of teacher experiences using skits in their classrooms, in hopes of not only contributing to the academic body of knowledge, but to help spread awareness among education professionals about the benefits of arts integration, such as Saeed's skits, to promote social justice.

Gwendolyn's Story

Gwendolyn Sage has been teaching history for 10 years. She taught Texas History for 5 years, and U.S. History the remainder of that time. She has been at her current school, Killjoy Middle School (pseudonym), for almost one year. Gwendolyn's bachelor's degree is in political science with a minor in history. After college graduation, she almost immediately applied for a master's program in curriculum and instruction. During her master's program, she entered an alternative certification program for teachers, during which she applied for the job at Killjoy.

Gwendolyn reported that she is "one of two children born to extremely supportive parents [who are] country people." With a younger sister who was born hard-of-hearing, Gwendolyn described being very protective of her. Gwendolyn was married right after high school graduation, and within approximately 5 years was the mother of three young children—two girls and one boy. Her marriage ended after 8 years. Gwendolyn went through a very traumatic time when her son was seven years old. He fell out of a tree, sustaining a serious head injury which put him in a coma for almost a week. Gwendolyn reported that neither she nor the doctors could do much for him, but that she would read him Dr. Seuss stories at his bedside. Eventually, he could move his toe at her

suggestion. He went on to survive and, in fact, to become a firefighter. Her oldest daughter was a high school valedictorian who later received her bachelor's degree in accounting and is currently employed for a large energy company. Gwendolyn's middle daughter works for a federal law enforcement agency, and heads a task force program that successfully captured one of the 15 "most wanted" criminals in the United States.

Gwendolyn proudly described all three of her children as being very successful in both education and career, despite the daunting statistics regarding single mothers. She further stated that while she was raising her three children alone, they lived below poverty level. She expressed gratitude at the fact that her children "were able to use grants . . . to get their education." When her youngest child was a senior in high school, the three amazing children Gwendolyn raised began encouraging her to go back to school and get her college degree. According to Gwendolyn, they told her, "Mom, it's your time to go back to school . . . we will support you." Gwendolyn remembered that she was somewhat nervous, because she "had never even sat down in front of a computer before." So, at first, she was "just gonna go to (the local community) college, take some computer classes, and get into the corporate world . . . be a secretary."

An English professor at that local community college helped Gwendolyn broaden her horizons. Gwendolyn often helped other students in the class edit their work, and it did not go unnoticed by her professor. She said, "(The professor) took me to the side one day, (and) told me, 'Miss Sage, you have a way with these kids in the tutorial groups that you've set up. I think you need to go for a full degree, and be an English teacher.'" Gwendolyn thought the professor's idea was "crazy" at first, but took the college pre-tests and aced them. This helped her see that she was on the right path.

Soon after starting college, she had enough working knowledge of computers that she secured a job at a local hotel, working her way up to general manager. Her continued efforts in college ended up earning her a degree in political science, and she thought that she may become a lawyer. However, something inside kept making Gwendolyn return to tutoring students. It was her immense enjoyment of tutoring students that caused her to apply for a graduate program in curriculum and instruction.

Gwendolyn credited her dad with her love of history and passion in the classroom. She noted,

> My dad loved politics and history, and every day until I lost him, you know, we would talk history. We were always . . . he was telling me the cool things. He had been a mason, so I would hear stories that I was not supposed to know about Santa Anna and other ones. You know, once I got into teaching, he called me every day that I was a teacher, and the first question that he would ask is, 'Hey, Teach . . . what'd your kids learn today?' And he wanted to know . . . and he was excited. And he just sparked that in me. I was very, very fortunate.

She further described her dad's sense of humor and how she exemplifies the same personality traits. "I mean, we laughed," Gwendolyn remembered. "My maiden name is Smart . . . they say, okay, I must be 100% Smart because . . . the jokes, the out-of-character, the passion for life and everything . . . that's my daddy. That's Daddy."

Gwendolyn credited another source for their contribution to shaping her into the teacher she is today: her first set of students. She described how integral they were in "modeling (her) as a teacher and what she needed to do to connect with (them) in encouraging their passion." Gwendolyn reminisced,

> It's the kids. I mean, it's the kids. It's seeing what do they need, what . . . in their eyes, when we would talk about something . . . did I just lose them? Okay, now, what can I say? Can we switch that a little bit? Okay, now I've got them back again. Okay, now I know where I've gotta go with that.

Gwendolyn also described the influence her mother had on her personality and worldview.

> My acceptance, my desire to help those in need . . . that all comes from my mom. My mom was a 100% southern woman. I mean, genteel the whole way. As solid as an oak tree. I mean, you weren't gonna break her. But you would never know that by the way she acted. I mean, you know . . . big meals, family all the time.

When Gwendolyn applied for the job as a middle school teacher while working on her master's degree, she did not have high hopes of being hired due to her age. However, to her pleasant surprise, the middle school where she applied was looking for someone with "maturity in the classroom." Gwendolyn expressed, "Their faith in me was everything." She continued, that since she had the lucrative general manager job to fall back on, "Deciding to be a teacher was definitely a passion, not a need."

A native Texan, Gwendolyn was happy to be assigned to teach Texas History for her first year. She remembered fondly that she had shared a love of history with her dad, and so she,

> walked right into a class that I loved. And right away, I was the weird teacher. My walls were decorated like you walked into a western bar or saloon . . . whatever way you wanted to look at it. We did off-the-wall assignments. We

> spend one day . . . it was a day in a mission, and no one talked when they came into my class. They did that in the class.

She continued, laughing: "And then I went to a conference, and BAM! someone showed me plays (Saeed's skits). And that's all I needed."

Teaching philosophy. Gwendolyn described her transformational teaching philosophy. She related, "When my children, that's what I call them, walk into the classroom, they step into a world that takes them right into history. Whatever it is. They feel it the minute they walk into my room." Gwendolyn further explained that she stresses to her students the future significance of history class. "If they do not know where we came from, how are they going to make the world a better place? How are they gonna be the change that makes a difference?" In addition, she showed that she does not believe in candy-coating history for her students.

> Whether it was something good in history or something bad in history, they have to take on that and grow from that. And so, when they ask the question, 'Ms. Sage, why do I have to learn this?' I tell them, "Because you're gonna make a difference. You're gonna make a change in this world, and you can't do it if you don't know what happened before.

Gwendolyn had a strong belief in continued professional development in one's content area. She mentioned that she believes teachers should regularly attend "content-related workshops." She elaborated,

> not classroom management, not team-building . . . but content . . . something in that conference is gonna be something they do not know. Because teachers are ever learning. And you're gonna find some cool little fact that's gonna be . . . a

connector to your students.

Gwendolyn justified her belief in content-area professional development by relating her personal experience in the importance of continually adding new knowledge to one's teaching toolbox. She stated that she attended a content-area workshop about Abraham Lincoln at which she learned that he had been a railroad lawyer before becoming a Congressman. This sparked her to search for material related to his work as a railroad lawyer. She discovered an old promotional advertisement for Union Pacific Railroad, which contained information about the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the importance of the railroad, and the populations that had grown around the railroad as it was built. Gwendolyn ended up sharing this with her students. She later discovered after that year's STAAR test was released to the public that the very same promotional ad was used as the basis of a question about the transcontinental railroad. Gwendolyn summarized, "I would have never known that. But I went to a workshop that told me he was a railroad lawyer. And so, I bent on that. And I brought it to life for my students. And it paid off."

Thoughts on teaching strategies and student engagement. When it came to teaching strategies, Gwendolyn liked to use those that would grab and maintain student interest. She explained

> I have a diverse group of students, and they're all gonna connect to (the material) in a different way. Whether they're reading it, writing it, performing it, you know, seeing it . . . these kids are born into a world with lots of bells and whistles and lots of pretty colors. You cannot just teach them black and white anymore. Because you've lost them. And it's not that they're bored and they

> don't want to learn. They are incapable of doing it because that's not the way they came into this world.

Gwendolyn added, "The toys are not that way from infant on. And you can't take them from this colorful, loud, noisy world of stimulation and put them into the classroom and sit them down to black and white." She concluded, "They don't know how to adjust to that, and focus on that. You've lost them." Gwendolyn expressed concern about the proliferation of district-mandated activities, which she indicated significantly encroach upon her time to implement strategies of her own choosing, such as Saeed's skits.

Regarding technology's place in the classroom, Gwendolyn was highly skeptical of its overuse. She felt that overuse of computers and other electronic devices is "limiting (students') ability to be creative." She continued,

> [Students] need to find their creativity again, or we're not gonna have the Gates and the Jobs and the people who created everything, because they're not gonna know how to do it. They don't know how to…create and make things. And if you don't give them that opportunity, if you don't pull back (the) electronics.

Gwendolyn concluded,

> Electronics is great for research, and to do your paper on and everything. I'm not saying that the world is not at their fingertips. But sometimes their fingertips need to work on their own…not just 'can they push a button.'

Gwendolyn also expressed concern about students taking shortcuts when using electronics, which may compromise their learning. She described a scenario that might happen in the classroom: "Ms. Sage! Ms. Sage! You're wanting us to draw a poster of the Industrial Revolution? Can I do it on my iPad?" "Sure, yes, you can." "Hold on . . .

images . . . cut, paste . . . cut, paste . . . cut, paste . . . There's my product." Gwendolyn concluded, "Not a lot of time spent on that—that's not enough."

Gwendolyn remembered the first time she found out about Saeed's skits at a local social studies conference. She related,

> I saw (the skits) up there and I'm like, 'Oh, gosh . . . my kids will never . . . and I only have a couple (students) that'll want to do it, and everybody else is not gonna want to do it . . . no one's gonna pay attention when they're performing it.

She theorized that perhaps these initial feelings stemmed from the fact that Saeed's skits contained humor. "I was worried about how they could handle that humor and still get the information that they needed from it," Gwendolyn said. "But much to my surprise when we did use that first play, they took it, they owned it." Gwendolyn described times that her classroom was filled with laughter from the hilarity contained in Saeed's skits: "When Santa Anna is being groomed in *Dealin Wit' A Dictator*. . . and when the guy hides under the table in *Temperance Throwdown*".

Gwendolyn believed that Saeed's skits enhance otherwise bland topics to make them palatable and create excitement for students. She noted,

> Like I said earlier, the kids need this extra to connect . . . whether it is the first presidents, or we get over to the Age of Jackson, or we're at Manifest Destiny. They need to have that feeling. And the only way they're really gonna see that feeling is when someone is performing it in front of them.

Gwendolyn expressed that, ideally, she would use one Saeed's skit for every period she teaches, if she could. "Whatever ones I could get my hands on from the lady that wrote these" (referring to researcher). Gwendolyn tries to "get them (students) into the time

period we were going through."

Gwendolyn shared that many students she taught in her first year of teaching (the students with whom she first implemented Saeed's skits) still email her today, and often mention their positive experiences with the skits. One email asked, "Ms. Sage, do you remember when we did this (skit) in 7th grade?" Another commented, "Ms. Sage, that was so cool . . . why couldn't we do that in high school, and we would've understood more of U.S. History?" It makes Gwendolyn feel exhilarated when she receives messages like these, because it lets her know that history "came alive for them."

Overall, she was a strong believer that students should get to choose some of their own projects and assignments. Gwendolyn related one time when students asked if they could "pick our favorite time that you taught us this year" and do a project on it. She delightfully noted, "Now, they own it. And they like history. 'Cause now, they said there's a favorite time." On another occasion, Gwendolyn used a Saeed's skit about various explorers in Texas as a springboard for a creative student project. She tasked students with creating a commercial to insert between each explorer included in the "talk show." She described the way the students blossomed as they created unique, humorous, and era-appropriate commercials to present between skit scenes. On another occasion, Gwendolyn's students used a Saeed's skit about the temperance movement to propose their own extension activity. She remembered, "That a group of kids . . . took that information . . . that reform . . . and at the end of the year, they asked me, 'Ms. Sage, can we do something on (a reform issue), because we need to change that.'" Gwendolyn continued, "They created . . . a public service message for the school. And so, they built on the plays of the reform movements and created their own." Another time, students

approached Gwendolyn about creating a presentation to go with what they were learning at the time. "Ms. Sage, you always show is the music and stuff (of) the time. If I do mine, can I pull all of the music . . . of that time (period) and put it in the slide?" "Do you know how to embed it?" "Yes. Yes, you can." Gwendolyn emphasized, "That is the connections. That's my contract."

A recent example of Gwendolyn's catering to student choice happened during the Manifest Destiny unit. Students found out from friends that another class was doing a PowerPoint over Manifest Destiny. Gwendolyn's class was instead, as a class, conducting a detailed analysis of pictures relevant to the Manifest Destiny era. Her students approached her to say, "Ms. Sage, did you know that all the other classes are having to do a PowerPoint?" In reply, Gwendolyn asked the students,

> Is that how you want to finish learning all of this information about Manifest Destiny? Or do we want to (analyze) these pictures together as a class, so when that picture is on the STAAR test, you don't even have to read it?

Students replied, "Oh, we don't want the PowerPoint." Gwendolyn then asked them, "When would you like to do a PowerPoint?" Students inquired, "Can we do it after the STAAR test?" Overall, Gwendolyn bred respect in her classroom and in her relationship with her students by providing them a choice in their own learning decisions. In addition, students were more engaged because they played a role in the activities they do in history class.

Gwendolyn reported being a "very visual person" in her classroom. In addition to Saeed's skits, she used a wide array of other strategies, including video clips, rap songs, PowerPoints, writing, drawing, hands-on, and group collaboration projects. She reported

not being afraid to "do a dumb thing up in front of the class—change the tone of my voice, or whatever" to make the lesson memorable. Gwendolyn gave an example of an Articles of Confederation lesson in which she used 13 loose pieces of spaghetti and marshmallows to help students understand that the purpose of central government under the new Constitution was to help the 13 individual states "stick together." She compared what other teachers might have done with her spaghetti lesson. "They can write me a paper. Or they can cut and paste me something. Or, they can come into my class, I can give them 13 pieces of spaghetti, and tell them, 'Make me a freestanding building." She gleefully continued, "They can't. It won't stay up. And then I ask (students), 'What do you need?'" She related that students invariably tell her they need something to make the spaghetti noodles stick together. And she was ready with a bag of marshmallows. Gwendolyn reported great satisfaction in using these types of hands-on activities to help students understand dry or otherwise difficult concepts. She added, "(Students) never would have gotten that on their electronic device. Now, they could see it."

Gwendolyn only used one traditional-type activity based upon rote memorization: an activity that used to be known as "100 History Facts" but is now known as "130 History Facts." She believed that if this activity helps even one student, it is worthwhile. She described expecting students to be familiar with 10 of these basic history facts per week, and they are quizzed over 10 facts every Friday. Gwendolyn indicated that using this activity also serves as somewhat of a preview of topics they have not covered yet. Gwendolyn noted, "I do 10 (facts) a week, like old-time vocabulary . . . and (students) know it now, it's routine. We go the next 10, the next 10, the next 10, and we'll start all over again." Gwendolyn reported that no other teachers implement these

fact-based Friday quizzes.

Regarding textbooks, she stated that she simply does not use them in general. There is an online textbook that the district has mandated teachers to use; however, Gwendolyn explains, "The kids have it, and I tell them it is a resource, like a dictionary. I just . . . I can't . . . and I know that the school district wants it, but I cannot do it." Gwendolyn noted that she was also not a fan of stations or gallery walks. "That is just another version of note-taking," but "without a teacher to stress the importance of what (they) just wrote." She expressed her belief that these represent

> the new thing that takes the teacher out of the equation, and no one is going to find the information. That is a review. Gallery walks are only for a review if you want to use it. Not for teaching the content.

Gwendolyn indicated that she always made her own tests, up until she came to her current district. At the former district, her department chair had to approve teacher-made tests. However, she reported that it was not an issue. She said, "I set (the test) out, and they looked at it, and gave it back to me." She stated that she always tried to utilize backwards design on the tests she made, so that they would be similar in format and content to the STAAR test at the end of the year. Gwendolyn even took the time to ensure that her individual test questions were similar in format to those that students might see on the STAAR test. She explained that she always conscientiously monitored the number of different types of questions on her tests, such as processing questions, so that even that aspect of the test would be similar to the state standardized test. Gwendolyn claimed that this strategy of test creation was very successful and that her students often indicated that she had prepared them well for the STAAR test.

Overall, she tried to comply with STAAR mandates, but only in ways that were acceptable to her personally and in ways that she could retain control.

Gwendolyn expressed that she believed skits help a topic linger in the students' minds. She explained that not only would the students talk about skits after they performed them, but would often ask to see the skit later, asking, "You think we could do that play real quick again . . . Ms. Sage?" After implementing Saeed's skits in her classroom, Gwendolyn often had students fill out exit ticket essays on broad questions like, "What did I learn today?" She remarked,

> They were able to come back and tell me the significance of whatever play it is they watched . . . and pull out the key information, that information the state says they need for the STAAR test . . . those TEKS.

Sense of community in Gwendolyn's history classroom. Gwendolyn reported that Saeed's skits enhanced the sense of community in her classroom. She said,

> You could see . . . each class is their own community . . . it's their own . . . they take pride in what they do. Did they do it better, did they come up with better props, and you could hear them talk among each other in the hallways.

She stated that having a student approach her to ask her to do him or her a favor and "get me out of such-and-such class so I can watch that class do their skit" was not an uncommon occurrence. Gwendolyn described what was happening as something akin to many little subdivisions "wanting to come together for the good. You could see that. Because they wanted to see each other's class do it."

Gwendolyn related her positive experience using a Saeed's skit called *Temperance Throwdown* in her Special Education class. She stated that this was a very

small class, so they had to modify the number of characters in the play. She also allowed students to change difficult words to make it easier for them to read and understand. Gwendolyn reported that some of the students who happily and willingly participated in this skit were students who were normally afraid to read in front of the class. In this case, Gwendolyn noted, "they had a blast." She described that the students in that special education class continued to talk about their good learning experience long after class was over, even coming into her classroom to ask, "Ms. Sage, has any other class got to do it?" Gwendolyn replied to them, "No, y'all were the special ones." The students continued, "When are we gonna get to see the video?" Gwendolyn stated,

> They will not miss a temperance movement question on the STAAR test. They may not get any other question right. But they will get that one. Because they did it. They felt it. And more of our struggling students need to do that. That's their hands-on. And hands-on is not always walking around at a station and copying notes.

Gwendolyn reported that it was easy to differentiate in her classroom using Saeed's skits. For example, for students who are reluctant to speak in front of the class, "they were the ones in charge of the signs." For skits with a talk show setting, reluctant speakers served as "bouncers." She described a specific example she saw when implementing a Saeed's skit about the textile mills:

> They wanted to pretend that they were working in the textile factory, so they wanted to pretend that they were sitting there . . . sending clothes through the sewing machines . . . they wanted to do something in it; they just didn't want to speak.

Multiple intelligences were easy to accommodate using Saeed's skits, according to Gwendolyn. She pointed out that students who were verbal can be assigned some sort of writing supplement, such as a "commercial" for the skit (as if the skit were a show on television). For the tactile learners, they could be appointed as "prop people." For those expressive students who were verbal and interpersonally strong, they were the ones who most enjoyed the key parts in the skit.

Gwendolyn shared that after she has implemented a Saeed's skit in her classroom, she talks to students about the characters, plot, author's purpose, and main idea to more deeply probe student understanding. Gwendolyn described the first Saeed's skit she saw have a major impact in her classroom: *Dealin' Wit' A Dictator,* about Mexican president Santa Anna and Stephen F. Austin. She explained that typically, in years past, activities for this unit were bland. She listed some of the typical fare: "We would just do those straight book, draw a picture, make a poster—wanted poster—whatever. And yeah, OK." When describing these past activities, Gwendolyn's voice was dull and lifeless. Then, when she began talking about the metamorphosis that occurred once she implemented the Saeed's skit, her voice became filled with wonder and hope.

> But when we did the play . . . they could see the animosity . . . between Stephen F. Austin and Santa Anna . . . they made that connection. Now, the people were alive; they were not just a name on a piece of paper.

Gwendolyn expressed her feeling that Saeed's skits helped some students "come out of that shell that some of them were in." She gave an example that she saw in her own classroom, where a typically introverted student would become gradually more eager to take on bigger roles in Saeed's skits. Gwendolyn shared that a typical question

these students would ask is, "Ms. Sage, are we gonna do another play by the end of the year, and can I have words? You know . . . can I say something?" Upon probing to see if the student would be comfortable enough, she usually got a resounding "Yes." Gwendolyn commented, "That's when I would be harassing the writer of these plays… 'Do you have another (skit) for the end of the year?'"

A Saeed's skit, *Just Another Day in the Ol' Massachusetts Textile Mill,* helped Gwendolyn promote social consciousness and cultural awareness in her classroom in terms of finding commonalities with other people who lived in the past. Toward the end of this skit, there is a hint of a sexual innuendo from the mill manager towards a female immigrant employee. Gwendolyn indicated that the students "realized how blessed workers are today, you know, because of those reforms. So, they saw the injustices, and they saw how they change. And then they also saw what we needed to do for the future."

She also noticed that students often brought their own multicultural flavors to skits performed in the classroom, and that other students could learn about the diverse cultures of their peers that way. For example, she noted:

> They have seen their fellow classmates come out and maybe put a little bit of their cultural slant, you know . . . it (the role they were playing) was just a little bit of theirs they could bring in. It was my Hispanic boys . . . they would . . . think of a Mexican as a hero and everything to it. And they would add that to (the role). You could see that.

When Gwendolyn implemented *Temperance Throwdown* with her Special Education class, she projected a political cartoon of temperance activist Carrie Nation, so that students could better understand the issue and identify with the figures involved. She

remembered,

> They got into it. They're like, 'Okay, so we're like her (pointing to Carrie Nation), right? That lady right up there?' I said, 'That's right. You hate (liquor). You hate it.' And the boys go, 'And the girls, they're supposed to be acting like little ladies, right? Like back from what you told us about the 13 colonies and stuff . . . and they're supposed to follow behind their men and not say nothing. Right, Ms. Sage?

Gwendolyn responded, "That's the way they're supposed to be, according to you." She felt that these special education students were developing social consciousness and a keen cross-era cultural awareness that could possibly not be provided through any other activity.

On another occasion, Gwendolyn shared an experience in which relevance and real-world connections were fostered in a profound way using a Saeed skit about Texas History. In this skit, one of the characters was the slave of a famous xplorer. Gwendolyn noted that it was difficult assigning the role of the slave, because she "didn't want to be accused of putting an African-American student in that" potentially troublesome situation. However, an African-American student volunteered for the part. Gwendolyn stated that the student threw himself into the role, and "played it to the hilt." When the skit was over, she had a serious conversation with the student. I asked him, "How did you feel about that?" And he said, "I'm so grateful for the changes over time." After a pause, he added, "Ms. Sage . . . that would be really hard." Gwendolyn stated that she told him, "You've gotta imagine it had to be real hard to kowtow." No further words were necessary.

Based on her observations since becoming a teacher, Gwendolyn was not at all optimistic regarding possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration, such as with activities like Saeed's skits, although she is a collaborative and friendly person by nature. Gwendolyn stated that personally, she felt that every teacher is different and has something unique to offer the students, explaining "they're gonna say it in a different way . . . stress something a little bit different." However, other teachers were not always so eager to do rotations and other collaborative activities. On the one occasion that her department did rotations, she told her students before going into another teacher's classroom: "Look . . . we're different . . . something may connect to you . . . please go with an open mind." Her rationale was that her students might be able to "grab (a strategy) and come back with it" and "when they pass that STAAR, that's on my meal . . . that's on my tab." She indicated that she would be more than willing to share activities she uses in her classroom, but that the opportunity seemed to never materialize due to the overall tendency of most teachers to only focus on themselves and the all-important STAAR test.

Gwendolyn had definite ideas regarding why inter- and intradisciplinary collaboration does not happen more often in some schools, such as Killjoy Middle. She explained that, unfortunately, there was a sort of "zero-sum game" going on: "Everybody's territorial. Everybody's worried about their STAAR. No time for us to touch, not realizing that if we did, it would benefit both of ours. Our kids' learning. That people are having to jump through hoops for the administrators." She related a specific story about another teacher in her department, who refused to collaborate with her.

She was right underneath me. She did not want rotations. (She said) 'We're not

> doing it'. She always said, 'Well, my kids always say that you did it this way,' or that 'When your kids come into my class, (they say) 'Ms. Sage does it this way . . . or that way' and they won't listen to me.

Another teacher in her department displayed similar behavior, according to Gwendolyn. Because Gwendolyn wanted her students to benefit from another teacher's (a male) perspective on the Civil War, she approached him about whether he'd be willing to come talk to her students. She shared, "He looked really nervous about it." Gwendolyn tried to put him at ease by telling him,

> I won't even talk to your kids if you don't want. I'll just sit in your class. And you let them do what they do, and I won't offer anything. But I would like you to come and say something to my kids. But I'll just babysit yours.

Gwendolyn explained why she used those words: "I put that out there so he'd know . . . Good Lord, I would not give them one of my strategies. I mean, Good God."

The long arm of the district. Gwendolyn reported that micromanagement at her school district is a big problem, that she experienced significant stress as a result, and that she was prevented from implementing activities of her own choosing, including Saeed's skits, for most of the school year. She explained that the stress had gotten so severe "on a daily basis, to the point that my cardiologist told me this year that I needed to leave this district. Because this was the worst year ever that he's had to deal with . . . my anxiety." Gwendolyn expressed her firm belief that the anxiety that led to the visit with her cardiologist was a direct result of the suffocating environment that's been created at the school in terms of teacher autonomy. Gwendolyn shared that she was so unhappy in her current situation that, at the three-quarter mark of the school year, she "just applied to

two different school district positions in the last week. For next year." She voiced her belief that teachers are no longer respected as degreed professionals, remarking, "Babysitters. That's all we are…that's obvious."

Gwendolyn also noted the district's persistent efforts to baby the teachers by assigning them "book studies," which were mandatory book-reading assignments that affect teacher choice by potentially leeching even more of teachers' individual planning time. Mandatory book studies can interfere to such an extent that teacher choice is severely affected, equating to less time for arts integrative activities like Saeed's skits. Gwendolyn indicated that these ubiquitous "book studies" were usually based upon "whatever book is popular at the time." She related that she was approached by administrators with one of these books, but stated that she rebuffed them. Gwendolyn reported that she let them know that she had a life, and was just too busy: "Naw. I'm taking the G/T (update) training (right now)." Scoffing at her district's ability to stay consistent for that long, she predicted that the intense obsession with the latest book study volume would soon pass, adding, "I'll wait until next year. They'll change their minds."

Gwendolyn shared that she wanted to lessen the chance of ending up in another school district with a similarly oppressive environment, and came up with a set of questions that she would ask her prospective new employers if she does, in fact, get an interview at another school district. She explained, "I will be better prepared in the questions I will ask in my next interviews . . . the questions will be centered around how my students will benefit more than how I will benefit going to that school." Gwendolyn described her ideal school as a place that wants an innovative teacher that brings in new ideas to foster student engagement. She stated that one important question she would ask

is, "Are you willing to give me a little leeway, and if it doesn't work out for the students, we sit down and talk about it, and then we regroup?" Gwendolyn justified her question: "If it's working for the kids, why rock the boat? I mean, come on . . . let's go with it."

Gwendolyn described her previous school district as providing somewhat more teacher autonomy than does her current district, even though even the former district seemed to place disproportionate emphasis upon STAAR test results. Her previous district's administrators were fully aware of Gwendolyn's unique personality and approach to teaching, and had told her, "Continue it . . . and just show a difference in the STAAR," which she did. Gwendolyn bemoaned her current district's controlling ways:

> The school district I have right now does not allow for anything beyond . . . the students being engaged, but only being engaged if they're on their electronics, not moving around the classroom (in what administrators would think is) without a point, without a focus.

Gwendolyn scoffed at her current district's very narrow view of what constitutes "student engagement." She continued, her voice dripping with disgust, "Because that's the way it's supposed to look (when they're on electronics) . . . like they're engaged."

Gwendolyn was asked to estimate the percentage of time she would have to implement activities of her own choosing, such as Saeed's skits, if she were implementing the district-mandated activities as told. "If I used the activities that are mandated to me by the others, I will have no time to bring in my own personality or my own ideas to enhance my students' learning." Gwendolyn was asked if she literally meant "no time." "No time," she replied. "That's the reason I balk at their activities."

Gwendolyn also expressed her dissatisfaction with the types of activities listed in

the departmental scope and sequence for American History, because she believed that they are neither effective nor engaging. Gwendolyn complained that "Every lesson starts with a gallery walk. Every lesson." Gwendolyn stated that even vocabulary activities are often in the same format—a gallery walk. Furthermore, the mandated activities were often in the same order in every lesson. She noted, "It's a gallery walk, and then a station maybe."

The other teachers in her department often did not use actual "stations," according to Gwendolyn. She explained, "Their kids don't like the stations; the kids aren't even getting up and moving. They just get the folder and pass it to the next table stations." Gwendolyn assessed that doing this sort of missed the point of a "stations activity." She remarked, "So you kind of take out the factor of what stations are, to get the kids up and moving . . . you just take the folder and pass to the next table, and that's the 'stations.'"

Gwendolyn added that this scenario happened with another teacher's pre-AP students. She theorized,

> all pre-AP kids that I've ever taught before, and my advanced kids, want to move and go. (The kids in that other class are) not getting up and moving because they do not want to get out of their chair. They don't want to get out of their chairs because they're bored out of their minds.

When Gwendolyn was asked who created the redundant gallery walk-laden lesson plans, she responded, "The Nancies." Gwendolyn was asked how these activities were received by other district personnel. She explained with a sense of disbelief,

> The Curriculum Administrators think it is so cool because the students are

> engaged. They think they are engaged because they are walking around and writing information down. Wrong! This is not engagement, this is copying and moving. Engagement takes place through understanding the topic and being able to apply their knowledge in discussions and activities. Seriously, I have to get out of this district…these people are crazy.

With regards to the district-mandated online textbook (which is paired with a traditional book format supplement that is kept in the classroom), by a famous publisher, Gwendolyn proudly shared that "they have not opened the book in my class this year. The kids have it, and they know that it's on there, and (administrators) tell me that I'm supposed to use it, but we don't." She reported that at least every other week, during faculty, department, or "alignment" meetings, administrators ask whether teachers are using it; however, she explained that "they don't really notice (her non-use) because the books are stacked like we use them right at the front desk." Gwendolyn stated that she always "comes back with the same (explanation), which is that not all kids have access to it. It doesn't do any good to just read something if someone is not there to make it real." She was asked whether administrators expected students to use the online textbook at home. She explained, "Oh, yes. They should . . . go home, read it at home, and do those assignments and send the assignments in to me to be graded." Gwendolyn was then asked whether administrators expected her to use the online textbook in class.

> Yes . . . I should be referring to it in class, but I don't . . . They always make the remark, 'Have you used it? Have you used it?' and I have to be honest and say, 'No, I have not had a chance yet.

Laughing, Gwendolyn concluded, "But now I'm getting towards the end of the school

year, and I never had a chance yet. So…"

Gwendolyn noted that she only used the book to provide assignments for students who have been assigned to In-School Suspension, because they "have to do (work) out of the book . . . that's the only time I ever open that book and look and see what's in there . . . for those kids." Gwendolyn believed that the excitement displayed by her district over this online textbook is somewhat misplaced. She described that they were excited over some of the features the online textbook was said to contain, such as a Spanish translation tool and a tool to adjust the reading level of the text. She did not share the excitement, explaining, "(My) kids have it, and I tell them it is a resource, like a dictionary." Gwendolyn also pointed out a potential issue with the online textbook. In her view, "there's so much garbage in it" that either the kids do not need to know, or wind up taking as gospel fact. Gwendolyn also observed that, with regards to the Spanish translation tool, "My ELL learners aren't comfortable enough in this . . . in that subject to care that they can knock (the content) over into Spanish and read it. They're not gonna go home and do it."

The relationship with her students was of the utmost importance to Gwendolyn. She noted that she believed her contract with her students superseded the one she has with the school district. She stated that she has a work contract with the district, which results in her receiving a paycheck, but has a social contract that she created at the beginning of the year with her students. This social contract with her students drives her to create an engaging environment in her history classroom. Gwendolyn did not believe that the district's mandated activities, such as the online textbook, were conducive to student engagement. Gwendolyn explained that in making

this social contract, some students asked her at the beginning of the year, "Can you help me like history?" She noted that "Most of them don't like history. And they asked me at the beginning, Can you help me like history? So, I won't do that. I can't do that with a textbook." She continued, "I asked (students) at the beginning of the year what did they want from me as a teacher . . . and it's my contract with them that oversees my contract with the school district." It was this belief that served as the catalyst for Gwendolyn's continued bucking of the system:

> If the school district does not want me at the end of the school year, because I gave my students 100%, and they walk out of my class being more successful than when they came in, then that's the school district's job. They can do that. But I will not use that textbook to solely teach content in my class, because that's not what my students asked of me.

Gwendolyn described that because of the constant pressure to implement the district-mandated online textbook, she struggled to integrate skits in her classroom during the current school year. She explained, "That's not one of the things they want in the classroom. And so, I've really fought at this school . . . I just broke down, and we did (it)." Administrators at Gwendolyn's school repeatedly announced that teachers should expect 10 walk-throughs per week, ostensibly to keep teachers tethered to the district-mandated activities. She added,

> I've finally gotten enough (of the constant scrutiny) that I don't care . . . I'm gonna . . . we're gonna do a play in my class. The kids are so excited right now that they have rushed through this unit so that we can get to the play.

Gwendolyn noted that having extra time left at the end of a lesson would be a way to

justify (to administrators) why her class is doing the skits. Regarding the ever-present pressure to conform that Gwendolyn mentioned, she said that it dissipated the day she finally used a skit in the classroom this year. Laughing, she described the experience: "I saw the look on my students' faces . . . it didn't matter anymore."

Gwendolyn's explained that her school district was consumed by testing. Recently, she was called into her "private data meeting" to discuss her students' scores on the latest benchmark test. She role-played the conversation:

> Ms. Sage, why did your students not improve dramatically?" To which she replied, "Because you don't give them enough time to experience (the content) before you test them again . . . Teach it, test it. Teach it, test it. Data! Data! Data! And, we need to have a meeting.

Gwendolyn then contrasted her vision of how things should operate: "Or, the kids learn it, they experience it, then we test it . . . not learn, test, learn, test."

Gwendolyn said that in addition to benchmarks every 9 weeks, a mock exam, and a STAAR test, that her district also makes teachers administer "unit tests" to students halfway through each grading period. She stated, "Oh, baby…there's way too many." She continued, "What is so sad, is that, say, we have 10 days on a subject. 4 of those will be allotted to the review and the test itself." She also revealed that due to the relentless testing calendar, "At no time do we ever go over the data with the students or reflect on the test itself. There's not enough time before we're started on the next one." Gwendolyn pointed out that there was no reflection, no analyzing the test questions, and no reviewing the vocabulary to see which words were problematic. She noted, "It's straight into the next subject for the next test."

As far as "test-taking strategies" went, Gwendolyn shared that "highlighter and post-it notes" represented the extent of the test-taking strategies students were encouraged to use by her school. She reiterated that the reason students were not able to do any reflection or thinking about the last test was because they were already thinking about the next one. Gwendolyn, still euphoric over a successful implementation of a Saeed's skit into her Special Education class, ruminated on the preposterousness of the testing and data obsession: "That data. That data. Well look . . . what I just did with my Special Education kids (referring to their recent implementation of a Saeed's skit in that class)? Well, guess what . . . they're passing."

The intense focus on testing bred resentment among teachers, not only because it sapped time and prevented them from implementing activities such as Saeed's skits, but also because of the unfairness inherent in the tests. Gwendolyn complained that every teacher was different when it comes to the administration of the various tests throughout the year in terms of classroom conditions or how much of the test is known beforehand. For example, she described that some of her colleagues planned to give an open-book unit test, a fact that school administrators did not know. Also, she reported that some teachers saw the tests beforehand, and others did not. She said, "The one that makes the copies will have seen it before, and then the…one that's best friends with her will have helped her type it…but I have not seen them." In addition, Gwendolyn indicated that there appeared to be troubling problems with district-made test design. She described a recent unit test that had five questions on a topic of little importance, while failing to include questions over the actual key information. Gwendolyn passionately felt that testing conditions like these were not fair and produced skewed data. "It's worthless,"

she quipped. In response to her colleagues' plan for an open-book test, Gwendolyn was stoic: "My students will not have an open-book test. And if mine are the lowest scores, they will be the lowest, honest scores."

Overall, Gwendolyn painted a picture of a negative and potentially psychologically damaging work environment. She reported that "there will be a floodgate open of teachers leaving the district this year" due to all the micromanagement. She further pointed out that the district had begun an "incentive," which she explained this way: "If you were not going to renew your contract and also informed the district by a certain date, you'd receive a $500 bonus." Gwendolyn lamented, "I'm in a school district that will pay (teachers) to let them know you're leaving," rather than figuring out ways to get them to stay.

Reactions to Gwendolyn's use of Saeed's skits. Gwendolyn reported that her colleagues were "a bunch of Negative Nancies" regarding her use of Saeed's skits in her classroom. These teachers, mostly veterans, complained that Gwendolyn "made too much noise," was "wasting time," and that she "needed to stay on track." She noted that they never took part in the skits or showed any interest in them whatsoever. Gwendolyn stated that in the face of these criticisms, she felt justified in her continued use of activities of her own choosing, including Saeed's skits. Furthermore, she took comfort in the fact that her school district was classified as a "Title I" district, which likely indicated that many students were too poor to have Wi-Fi or Internet access at home. She explained her belief that due to the students' low-SES situation, it did not make sense for the district to make an online textbook "a mainstay in their education right now."

Gwendolyn served as a new teacher mentor on her campus, and noticed that some

of these new teachers seemed to be much more open to trying out skits as a learning strategy in their classrooms, even given the very regimented, test-driven environment. She stated that these new teachers would enter her classroom periodically for new teacher-mentor meetings, and that they "realized that my classroom was different than everyone else's." One such teacher, a math teacher, stated, "Ms. Sage, I wish they had a math play. I would do it even though we're under such a crunch with math. What a fun activity."

Gwendolyn also recounted tales of new teachers at her school who were taken under the wing of Negative Nancy-types, and that they usually became as insular as their counterparts in short order. Regarding one new teacher befriended by the Nancies, Gwendolyn shared that he was "scared to buck the system because he's been . . . you know, well by god, they treat him like he's their son. And he's nearly 30 years old." She tried to break through to this teacher, but concluded that "he'll never be able to blossom as a true teacher because (they've) got him pigeoned right here . . . he can't find himself." She wisecracked, in a very timely fashion, "Maybe he needs a gallery walk." Becoming more serious, she realized that this fellow was missing out on the delights of teaching with fun activities like Saeed's skits. She then added, "He needs to come to my room one day and just break loose and have fun with it."

Gwendolyn's administrators were "kind of leery" of the first Saeed's skit. However, afterward, they kept saying to Gwendolyn, "These kids are still talking about it, Ms. Sage! They have left your room talking about it. They're talking about the characters . . . that's amazing!" The administrators noticed that English Language Learner (ELL) students in Gwendolyn's class seemed to share the excitement. One

approached administrators to say, "This is what we did today in Ms. Sage's class!" When administrators asked the ELL student if he participated in the play, he responded, "I just held the board . . . but I was part of it."

Even though administrators appeared to notice positive effects of the skits, this did not translate into increased flexibility or leeway when it came to the environment of micromanagement to which teachers are subject. Gwendolyn felt that administrators should be more concerned with modeling (what they expect out of teachers, students, and other staff) than micromanagement. She quipped, "What's so sad is, you know, we have all of these buzzwords in education, and one of them is "modeling." She elaborated: "Students are telling me all the time, 'Well, shouldn't our (principals) model for us?' So, if they can't give the feedback they're expecting us to give the students, then should they keep their position?"

Miscellaneous musings. Gwendolyn noticed that some of the "Negative Nancies" appeared to have a weak grasp on historical content, which perhaps was a cause of their adherence to mandated activities, such as the departmental lesson plans they created that were characterized by repetitiveness and a lack of creativity. In addition, it may also be related to their reluctance to take risks and collaborate, which might result in their negativity towards arts integration such as Saeed's skits. Gwendolyn related an incident during a meeting in which her content-area colleagues were discussing upcoming lessons related to causes of the Civil War. She noticed that the other teachers did not include the Lincoln-Douglas debates as an important event leading up to the Civil War. She related that the teachers balked at her suggestion, saying that the TEKS "don't say anything about the Lincoln-Douglas debates." Gwendolyn passionately defended her

case, but the importance of the Lincoln-Douglas debates was still lost on these colleagues even though the Lincoln-Douglas debates would be an important aspect of the election of Abraham Lincoln, which was listed in the TEKS.

Later in the same conversation, these same colleagues balked at Gwendolyn's question as to why they left out the famous abolitionist John Brown from the list. Again, their response was, "Oh, he's not in our TEKS." Once again, Gwendolyn was flabbergasted, having to explain,

> Let's go back to John Brown real quick . . . Harper's Ferry . . . is hung . . . becomes a martyr . . . a symbol for the abolitionist movement. They write a song about him: John Brown's Body . . . which is the tune for the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

The famous Bleeding Kansas episode centering around John Brown, as well as the Battle Hymn of the Republic, were both clearly included in the TEKS. About the Battle Hymn, Gwendolyn queried, "…the tune comes from John Brown's Body, and how can you tell the kids that tune if you don't tell them who John Brown is?" She concluded that this episode highlighted an interesting phenomenon. Teachers without a depth of content expertise may focus myopically on each superficial TEK, because of the emphasis on the STAAR test, without understanding all the deeper content that is inherent in each one. As a result, their students may not be getting all the information that would help them be successful. Gwendolyn pointedly remarked, "As teachers, we have to know the content."

Gwendolyn noted another side effect of a lack of content knowledge. She noticed that the Negative Nancies are "addicted to Teachers Pay Teachers (website)." She explained that, oftentimes, these teachers were on this website when they were supposed

to be teaching, "(getting) their assignments for the next day." Gwendolyn elaborated on why she had a problem with their use of these activities: "They just pull that (activity) off of there, and that is an assignment that has to do with another state. Okay? Now you're giving them too much garbage that doesn't pertain to what they need to know…" Gwendolyn added that there was a teacher in her department who goes onto Teachers Pay Teachers to find assignments that he needed for the next day's activity. She complained, "…you only rely on someone else's work . . . you don't even tweak it and make it your own?"

Personal experience with Saeed's skits. Gwendolyn was asked what her personal experience was like while a skit was going on in her classroom. She paused, before saying, "Pride. Watching my students just bloom. You know, watching, they had a passion for history right then, something I wanted them to take from my class." When Gwendolyn answered, she seemed to be mentally transported back to a special moment in her classroom, that quintessential moment of which teachers supposedly dream.

Social Justice Through Saeed's Skits. Gwendolyn gave her own definition of social justice: "Equality . . . opportunities for all, regardless of their financial status, the color of their skin, their religious beliefs . . . across the board. I mean, it's just fairness and consistency regardless of who, what." When Gwendolyn was later asked whether she felt social justice was encouraged by implementation of Saeed's skits in her classroom, she answered, "Definitely. Definitely. All the walls are torn down when you do a play. Everyone is part of it. And they can own it, and bring in their real life to that character and make it their own." Gwendolyn felt that Saeed's skits helped make access to the history content she teaches more equitable, and this led her to implement them

along with as many topics as possible. She further stated, "And so, I wanted to encourage it; I wanted them to continue being able to express themselves through that theater style in the classroom."

Gwendolyn felt that Saeed's skits were superior to traditional and student-centered activities in fostering student engagement and sense of community in the classroom. She related, "If I did not have the ability to allow my kids to participate in these skits where they could feel it and own it and everything, they would have just (tuned) out." With traditional or student-centered activities, Gwendolyn felt that the prognosis was not as positive. "It was just a book they read, it was just a topic we did real quick . . . and it's gone the next day. Except for those that have a passion for history, it's gone."

She expressed her feelings about Saeed's skits:

> I think it's a vital tool. It gives them that ability to live history, and express it, and put . . . themselves in it, so that maybe they can see, 'Okay, I can see why they wanted to change this. You know? If they're doing the (textile) mills skit, 'Okay, yeah, this is not cool. What would happen if my dad got hurt? They're just gonna fire him and now we don't have a home anymore? I don't get my cell phone?' And so, it's that connection.

Future plans for Saeed's skits. Gwendolyn pointed to new teachers in her building who visited her classroom and asked for skits to be written for their content areas, such as math. Gwendolyn shared this information with the researcher, who may decide to broaden her target audience and create skits for other content areas in the future. Gwendolyn's classroom served as a place where other teachers were inspired by

the student engagement they see in her classroom via implementation of Saeed's skits. This may spark a whole new avenue for Saeed's skits to help foster student engagement and sense of community for a whole new group of students in another content area.

Gwendolyn also has plans for new ways to use Saeed's skits in her classroom. She talked about her plans to use the last two weeks of school, providing that "the powers-that-be (don't) dictate what I have to do" down to the last day of the school year, allowing students to write their own skits based upon the historical period they enjoyed the most. They would utilize Saeed's skits as a sort of springboard or example from which to create their own. Gwendolyn explained,

> I want them to pick a period--pick a time. And do their own. And let's share at the end of the year. And on some of those I'm gonna ask them, okay, so you've taken this topic. Can you take the topic and bring it forward? You know, if you do it over Henry David Thoreau and transcendentalism, can you bring it up and show me how Martin Luther King used that?

Gwendolyn gave other examples of how students might use Saeed's skits to extend their knowledge of topics they had learned through the year in a creative way that honored student choice. She added, referring to what students might be able to create and extend knowledge on their favorite time periods: "Can you show that in (your) skit . . . can you do it as a time warp, maybe? . . . so let those that want to be really creative grab that idea . . . and take that one."

Coping with encroachment upon teacher autonomy. To continue reaping the benefits of Saeed's skits in her history classroom, Gwendolyn was fully aware that she

would have to continue playing the game, toggling from rebel to compliant employee to tolerate the micromanagement. She toyfully commented, "I'm an in-between. I am…I know how to walk the line." She gave a glimpse of one of her strategies: "you talk their lingo. You show them the 'data' that what you're doing works . . . that's all they want." When asked her theory on why administrators and politicians do not pay attention to the vast amount of research regarding arts integration, she adamantly replied, "Because they're not from the field of education." Gwendolyn then expressed a dream she had for the future: "I just think that a whole bunch of us very innovative teachers just need to form our own charter school."

Gwendolyn had put a lot of thought into how to handle encroachment upon her teacher autonomy. She explained,

> I'm teaching because that's what I wanted to do . . . Yes . . . I really love to teach. And I have no problem looking at them and telling them, "I'm here because I'm supposed to be here. And I'm supposed to be with these kids . . . I'm living my dream . . . and the minute you stop letting me live my dream, I can go back to the corporate world. That's my advantage over you with your family. It's just me now, and my kids are grown and through college and all; they're on their own.

One item that Gwendolyn felt was a pressing issue that has the potential to further subvert teacher autonomy in the short term--equating to even less time to implement activities such as Saeed's skits--is a new, euphemistically-named initiative that is proliferating in Texas called "Districts of Innovation." The district where Gwendolyn teaches reached a "District of Innovation" status. Like many other teachers, Gwendolyn heard about some of the rights that teachers will purportedly lose because of this plan.

She has observed what she believes are some of its ramifications already. She referred to her district's new high school, which, like the new buildings in many other districts, was rumored to be "being designed on the way the Japanese build their high schools." She described the "outside hall walls are glass, (so) you can see in there." Ostensibly, the glass classroom walls could intensify teachers' feelings of micromanagement. Gwendolyn continued,

> It's very limited to what you can put on the walls, because the room is not technically yours. The podium and the little desk connect with a magnet, and the little podium has wheels on it, and the teachers take their podiums with them . . . because that's the only inside space you have to keep anything. You take the podium with you to your conference, because your room will be used by someone else.

She added that during teachers' conferences, they may be routed to a "group planning room" with cubicles, where they will be expected to plan with others in their content area."

Gwendolyn acknowledged that she was told about other possible losses of teacher protections that reportedly could come with a district's "District of Innovation" title. For example, she was informed that salaries may be adjusted based upon "performance" (which probably meant something with respect to testing data), contracts would no longer be binding, teachers would be able to be hired without proper certification, conference periods could be taken away entirely, there would be no cap to class sizes, and much more. She added, "It'll be as many students as they want in your classroom." Talking about these possibilities seemed to fill Gwendolyn with feelings of

defeat. She sadly concluded, "That's the wave of the future."

Social action brainstorming. Gwendolyn hinted at her belief in being politically active when she shared the story of how she used her H.E.B. Teacher of the Year platform to speak to state legislators about the current problems in education. She remembered,

> When I was in Austin, and I was standing there, and some of the legislators were out in the audience that night . . . I told them to please stop making decisions for the youth of Texas without coming and sitting in a classroom, and that they were all welcome to come and visit my classroom at any time, without any notice. I said . . . "Come into my room . . . greet my students, come see what they're doing, and then please come back to Austin and make your decisions for the youth of Texas. I said, 'They are not statistics." And . . . no one has ever shown up. Now one has sent me an email. First come meet my students, if you're making decisions for them. You know . . . they're not a number on a paper. They're not the data in school districts, okay? They're, you know, ever-changing . . . problems at home . . . you can't walk in their shoes type of kids. Come see! And talk to them. Yes, please, just watch in the classroom . . . watch as their eyes light up, and when they're just a dull blank because we're reading from one of your state-sponsored books.

Morton's Story

"Morton Wise" was in his 13th year of teaching, and currently teaching 8th grade U.S. History at Topdown Middle School (pseudonym). He has taught 7th grade Texas History, 8th grade American History, and 9th grade World Geography, and middle school

mathematics. He graduated from high school with a B+ grade point average, and went on to attain his Bachelors in Science with a minor in History from a prominent state university. Later, he went through an alternative certification program at a local community college to become a teacher. He has three certifications: 4-8 Generalist, 8-12 Social Studies Composite, and 8-12 History.

Morton revealed that he was not always the best middle school student, and was often in trouble and/or in the assistant principals' or counselors' offices. Morton joked,

> In fact, that's putting it nice . . . I was a mess. It was a pretty rough four-years of my life . . . I was on a first-name basis with my assistant principal. The counselors at the school actually covered for a lot of what I did."

He reported that his family was considered low-socioeconomic status (low-SES), and that his living situation was often not ideal. He stated that his family lived in a trailer with no air conditioning and that there were unsafe conditions, such as a hole in the floor of the washroom that allowed one to view floodwaters fly by.

Morton further revealed that even though he was considered low-SES, he was bussed from his very poor neighborhood to a school 17 miles away that was mostly filled with students from wealthy families. He stated that he felt that he did not fit in at this school, and often felt left out. Morton remembered, "I was definitely the kid left out . . . I was not the native . . . we'll put it that way." He continued,

> All the other students there . . . not the ones that rode my bus . . . were very affluent, they were very well-off, they were in a brand-new neighborhood . . . you could tell that I was the outcast. Through mannerisms, through material wealth, just . . . well . . . it was a very clear divide between my low-SES situation and the

other students who had a much higher SES.

Morton discussed being a child that had been labeled G/T at a very early age. He remembered that his mom "didn't know what to do with" this information, such as by possibly requesting advanced classes for him. So, Morton remained in mostly regular classes. He recollected silently observing what was happening around him, and feeling like he did not belong. Because of this feeling, he never interacted much at all with his peers. Morton lamented that he "had plenty to offer" peers, but "nothing ever came of it . . . my intelligence was wasted" at this school. This experience led Morton to have a deep-seated empathy for students in his classroom who may be living in similar circumstances. He related,

> I definitely have an affinity for those students who I see in my classroom who . . . get overlooked because they never say a word . . . they're not the star achiever that's standing out like the quarterback or the cheerleader. So, they don't get recognition that way. They're not acting out being the class clown, so they don't get negative recognition that way. They don't get any recognition at all.

Morton felt certain that many of his current perceptions, behaviors, and worldviews stem from his childhood. He expressed happiness at the fact that what he termed the "craziness of his middle school years" did not continue, and he successfully completed his education and gain employment as a teacher. Still, Morton stated, "I did not understand at the time the advantage I had going to this affluent school."

Morton described a rich learning environment in that class that was marked by a significant amount of student choice. He stated,

> We were actually programming animation, and we were allowed to go wherever

> we wanted to. So yes, me in my little 8th grade boyhood, I drew one army tank driving onto the screen blowing up another army tank. But we were allowed the freedom to do that.

Even though Morton did not feel like he fit in with his peers, he credits this single class as having provided an epiphany that laid the groundwork for his future college aspirations. He noted, "My desire to get my (college) degree in computer science . . . it happened right there in an 8th grade classroom at an affluent school."

Morton stated, "I would have to say that there are several people who've had an influence on my personality . . . some of which I've met, and some of which I've not." Morton stated that his mother had a huge impact on his personality in that "she influenced me to not be discriminatory." Morton also listed British author C.S. Lewis as having an impact on his worldview, in terms of ideas regarding reasoning and philosophy, which he "pretty much adopted as my own." Third, Morton stated that with regards to the aspect of his personality that guides his teaching in the classroom, he feels "My number one teaching influence was that theater arts teacher." Lastly, he named the book *Teach Like a Champion* as having an effect on the classroom manner he displays today. He described this as a book "dedicated towards educators, giving them teaching methodologies . . . it's subject-neutral, grade-level neutral ways of just implementing teaching strategies in the classroom."

Morton had a rather interesting first year as a teacher, having been assigned to teach a sort of remedial class of middle school mathematics. He claimed he was given approximately 10 of the "lowest of the low" students and that, "behind closed doors, the school administrators had said, 'Mr. Wise, these kids will fail the state standardized test.

We simply ask that you do something--anything--to increase their scores by any amount." Morton described what he called the "good outcomes" of this assignment: the "incredibly small class sizes" and the "latitude to do whatever he wished to get mathematics across." He gleefully elaborated: "Trust me, I went wide."

Morton took the administrators' charge to heart, using what he described as "miniatures from Lord of the Rings for doing integers, to (estimating) measurements and angles through miniature starships blasting each other across the tabletop . . . I went everywhere." Morton reported having great success in using these out-of-the-box teaching strategies in helping struggling students understand difficult concepts. Morton remembered that one of his first challenges was teaching basic measurement. Morton began by throwing out a general question to his students: "How long is a centimeter?" He recalled that the students had varying responses which were all very far off the mark, with many students giving estimates closer to a foot, a meter, or even a yard.

Because he had the freedom to use any activity he saw fit to help the students grow, Morton (an avid game aficionado) "prescribed" a game called Battle Fleet Gothic, produced by a British company called Games Workshop. In this game, all measurements were in centimeters. Morton explained,

> The way it works is that you can maneuver your ship in centimeters with a tape measure. You can turn your ship with a compass with angles up to 45 degrees. And then you took weapons, and you blew the other guys off the table . . . but the trick was that you had to guess the range to your target. In centimeters.

Morton ended by revealing the outcome of his game ploy. "The first shots went into the hallway. But, pretty soon, they were landing those shots right on target."

In addition to the broad leeway Morton enjoyed to utilize creative teaching techniques, he also was fortunate to have been befriended by the theater arts teacher at his school. He remembered,

> She roped me into being the assistant director of the One-Act Play. I loved it. And I enjoyed it. And that's when I saw students that were being absolute terrors in the classrooms of other teachers being amazing for her. And that's when I got to see that this theater was actually the open door for these students to learn.

In witnessing the power that theater held in bringing out students' best, Morton cited the example of a very unique young man named "Drew." Drew gave all his teachers fits, and often created class disturbances related to his apparent fixation on sheep. Morton further explained, jokingly, "I am firmly convinced that if (Drew) ever said the word 'sheep' in his math class again, he would be a corpse on the floor . . . the kid was a weird duck."

However, Morton had an epiphany one day upon attending a post-UIL One-Act Play performance, in which Drew played the lead role. Morton described Drew's performance:

> He and his co-stars realized . . . there's no judges out there . . . we're free to do whatever we want . . . and (Drew) hammed it up. And I saw comedy like I've never seen before. He was better than what I saw on television.

Morton indicated that he was inspired by this so much that he pondered how he might be able to integrate theater activities in his own classroom, and hatched a plan—but it did not happen overnight.

The next year, Morton was given the opportunity to move to his preferred subject area, social studies. It was there where he began to implement theater arts-based learning

activities. Morton said he started very simply, having students act out Civil War-era historical figures/"characters." Students quickly took ownership of these characters, researching them, and taking on their various personae. Morton continued using theater arts-type characterization activities in history class over the next few years, and it blossomed into an even more elaborate endeavor. His unofficial mentor, the theater arts teacher, seemed impressed at the plays being generated and performed in Morton's classroom.

Morton's teaching philosophy. Morton detailed his twofold teaching philosophy. He stated that he believed every child can learn, but not every child would learn. He understood that the second part of his teaching philosophy could be seen as controversial. He explained that he believed every human being had the innate capability to improve him or herself and that all people would attempt to improve themselves to differing degrees depending on their personal societies and individual environments. He revealed himself to be a realist, and pointed to graduation rates to help explain how he came to his teaching philosophy. "If every child actually did learn, we'd have 100% graduation rates, and we'd have the most highly educated society on the globe and in all of human history . . . we don't." He also pointed to high dropout rates, especially in inner cities, and noted that many students become overwhelmed and simply stop trying.

Morton did not arrive at his teaching philosophy without evidence. He described seeing students in his classroom who displayed apathetic behaviors that let him know they had checked out, or as Morton put it, "I'm done with this." Morton described what "I'm done with this" looked like in the classroom, and was able to pinpoint when it often occurred:

> At the high school level, it'd happen the January after they saw their first transcript. I saw tears in their eyes, I saw heads down on the desk, I saw hands go up in the air, and I saw resignation, and they pretty much said, "Look . . . I'm out. This isn't for me.

There was a long pause. Morton then continued, "Students are born with the ability or capacity…but we stamp it out of them with this public education system. Student interests are secondary to state scores."

Thoughts on teaching strategies and student engagement. Morton appeared to be a teacher who was willing to utilize many different types of teaching strategies in his classroom. He used many technology-based activities via *Chromebooks*, and many online tools, both formal and informal. He also implemented videos, Saeed's skits, mimes, discussions, debates, current events, and much more. Morton was a flexible teacher that did not mind swapping students with other teachers, having his students participate in large group activities with other classes, collaborating with other teachers in using rotations, or assisting students (including students of other teachers) through tutoring. Morton also put a high premium on student choice, or personalizing assignments based on student interest. Lately, he had been using mostly activities that were not of his own choosing, but were prescribed by the school district. Morton reminisced,

> Before STAAR, I often assigned open-format projects. I gave students the content, but they presented it any way they decided to. Students often chose theater. When students have a choice, and they choose theater, it tells you something. Now…now…well, we're feeding (the students) canned Spam.

Morton was very proficient with technology, and stated that he was very comfortable with integrating as many different types of technology into his classroom as he can. "Dump it all in. Give me holograms, transporters, the *Enterprise* . . . . That needs to be in my classroom." Morton was joking, and yet very serious about his acceptance of electronic technology in the classroom. This was based upon his belief that, "The students are into technology. And 90% of the jobs they are going to do have not been invented yet, and will be based off technology. The Industrial Revolution never stops. And it's still going forward." Morton did not seem to feel that creative teaching styles would be stifled in any way by the use of computers or other technology. He gave an example of a 7th grade student who "(has) his own YouTube channel. He's making videos anyway. Might as well be a Saeed's skit." Morton went on to describe his vision of an ongoing project on which teachers and students could collaborate on performances of Saeed's skits, which would be recorded and uploaded onto a private YouTube channel for others to enjoy—and possibly use as learning tools. He elaborated, with a twinkle in his eye, "I think we need to have the teachers perform the skits. Students would see their teachers acting the fool. It would break the divide between students and teachers!"

Morton was asked how his classroom would look if he had total control. Morton gleefully replied, "Aww, man. Oh, my God. If I had to worry about nothing . . . no tests . . . no curriculum . . . no anything . . . and it was Mr. Wise, unleashed…" He went on to describe yearning for the freedom to allow students to focus on the things in which they are most interested. Morton explained,

> Okay, here's the deal. When it comes to geography, when it comes to history, there are things in there that grab the students' attention. That's the stuff that

> often gets overlooked. Yeah, I would start there. I would start with the interesting things that would grab the students' attention and I would teach that, because I would want them to have a love of social studies. All the things we think that are important and what-not, they will be learned much more easily later in life when they have a love and a passion for this subject.

Morton went on to describe allowing a differentiated environment in which he would allow each student in the history classroom to choose his or her own starting point in history, based on individualized student interests, for a personalized year-long learning experience. He explained what he would say to his students: "Pick something . . . any point in history. I do not care what is your starting point. That is what your project is gonna be about."

Morton offered his belief that "any educational activity could benefit any child to some degree;" however, he felt that some teaching strategies are more efficient than others at reaching various students, since they learn in different ways. He also cited disengagement as a common problem in his classroom. He theorized that this was a symptom, not a cause, and that his feeling was that students who were disengaged may feel that they do not belong for various reasons. Because of this, he felt that it was a teacher's obligation to test out strategies that will engage those students. He gave examples of strategies he has tried in his own classroom with which he has experienced success and that seemed to level the playing field for students like these.

One such activity was the implementation of current events, which he felt were useful because they describe recent events and help students make real-world connections. Because they were recent events, most or all students had not read about

them, and were therefore starting at the same level of knowledge. This helped those students who felt like they did not belong to become more willing to share their opinions and thoughts, and to become contributing members of the classroom community. Morton expressed that it was very satisfying to see these students come to the realization that each of their individual voices was integral to the educational process and that their comments had value. Morton also cited his endearment for current events' ability to provide an outlet for students to talk about their social situations, and to understand and form their own judgements on events happening in the world in a "more complex and complete way than they otherwise would have."

Morton detailed some of his experiences revolving around student engagement regarding the implementation of skits in the classroom. Morton pointed to one Saeed skit, *Mo' Sugar, Mo' Problemz*, describing how it "inject[ed] humor into what would be a bland unit". Morton further explained, "Students obviously are willing to engage with humor much more than boredom. And so, we gain much more engagement that way." When asked how he could tell that his students were engaged when using Saeed's skits, he answered quickly and with student quotes.

> Well, the 'how I could tell' part is easy. Anytime students say, 'Mr. Wise, can we do that again?' that's pretty much a big clue . . . That tells me they're engaged. And so, every time I do an activity, be it one of Saeed's skits, something of my own devising, or really anything, anytime that I get a student or a class to say, 'Mr. Wise, I want to do that again,' I know I'm where I need to be.

Morton listed a few more of the typical responses that his students gave after experiencing a Saeed's skit in his classroom, noting that he enjoyed hearing expressions

such as these, and did not want to be known as the "boring teacher":

- "Mr. Wise, can we do this for the rest of the year?"
- "Mr. Wise, can I stay in here and not go to my next class?"
- "Mr. Wise, can I be this part (character) next time?"
- "Oh, Mr. Wise, you're the best teacher on campus."
- "Oh, Mr. Wise, I want to stay in your class all day."
- "Oh, Mr. Wise, can I please (stay)? I don't want to go to that other class . . . because it's boring in there."

Morton also discussed further evidence of the impact of skits on student engagement, in terms of looking at student comprehension and content retention. Morton said that he often used basic questions after a skit, such as, "What was the main idea of the skit?" Morton shared that he believed that students' ability to discuss an issue after a skit was, in fact, an assessment of student learning. He said, "every time I ask comprehension questions, I get very positive feedback." He also gave general descriptions of students discussing character actions after a skit, with comments such as, "I liked when such-and-such character did this or that."

However, Morton described that standardized assessments provided even more evidence of understanding. Morton explained,

> When you give that assessment a week later, and a question that's over the same material as the drama, and you get well over 90% accuracy, that is giving me the numerical data to show, "Hey, all these students have it," and I know they have that question specifically because I did a (skit) over that specific standard from the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills.

Morton related a story about how he generated classroom-specific data, completely unrelated to district benchmark assessments, for the purposes of providing evidence of comprehension and understanding to administrators who may visit his classroom during a Saeed's skit. He explained,

> when I have them test, I was--last year, for example--I had them test on Google Forms. Google Forms collected the data. I was able to point directly to (speaking to administrator during a walkthrough evaluation), "Look, Sir, what you see up on my screen right now is question such-and-such. This is their performance on that question. And (administrators) are able to see . . . they're able to see it in pie chart form . . . the comprehension and understanding.

Morton described the assistant principal, Dr. D. Posit, as being very satisfied and impressed at the instantaneous feedback regarding the ability of Saeed's skits to enhance learning in such a clear-cut way. Morton's comfort level with technology greatly influenced his ability to carry out these types of impromptu data-crunching tasks.

Sense of community in Morton's history classroom. Morton was asked if he felt that Saeed's skits helped to foster an increased sense of community in his history classroom. Morton replied,

> There's always a sense of community in the classroom. The question is, is it a safe community? There's communities out there that are definitely not 'safe' . . . There's hostile communities, and unfortunately there are some classrooms that . . . quite frankly have a hostile community. And when a student feels safe, they're much more willing to take risks in learning the material."

Morton noted that skits seemed to create a safe classroom environment that immediately

puts students at ease. He believed that this was because use of skits "puts students on an even playing field" and "breaks the ice with me" (the teacher). Morton further revealed that he used skits to modify his classroom environment anytime the classroom environment seems to be reverting into drudgery, boredom, or negativity. He stated,

> Right now, I see myself sliding back into that mode. And so, that's like my warning light: I'm bored, and so the students must be bored. Therefore, we must do something. What can I do? And Saeed's skits are always a go-to for that. Now, I always have to decide, 'Which one do I want to do?'

Morton explained that when the class environment needed perking up, such as by the reintroduction of Saeed's skits, "We need to go back into the more fun stuff, just to get the class back to where it is." Morton asserted that Saeed's skits promoted a feeling of community togetherness and trust, in the sense that everyone had something to learn from each other. He described his vision of "teachers and students doing (Saeed's) skits together in one big, cheerful and engaged learning community."

Morton described that his classroom community was further enhanced by the ease of differentiation that Saeed's skits provide. Morton's observations about improved differentiation ran the gamut across ELL, Special Education/504, Gifted/Talented, unmotivated, multicultural, at-risk, and others. Morton explained, "I would say that Saeed's skits are an excellent source of differentiation because of the way that they're actually composed." Morton then mentioned examples of how he used Saeed's skits to differentiate in the past:

- "If I have a student that's gonna be a class clown--they're just too smart for their own good--I'm going to give them the main part where they can act crazy and get

all that attention they are seeking."

- "If I have that super-amazing G/T student that's super quiet and bashful, and will not get in front of a classroom before they die . . . of stage fright, I'm gonna let that person be the narrator."
- "The strong reader can actually take (a) bigger part. The weaker reader can actually take the smaller part."
- "My 'new arrival' that just got in and can barely speak three words of English, they're gonna go ahead and take the part that has no speaking parts . . . they get to participate without having to encounter the language barrier. As they learn more, they can take the part that has maybe only two or three lines of speaking. So, they get to engage the language on a safer level."
- "For those people that . . . they're more 'behind the scenes' type personality, I can give them something like, prop management; they help me set up the stage. I have people that . . . want to be the filmer, anytime we video the Saeed skit . . . they want to be the one with the phone and the camera."

Morton was asked if he thought skits seemed to help to touch upon the "multiple intelligences" in his classroom, strengthening his classroom community by virtue of not leaving anyone out. Morton answered in the affirmative: "Yes. That's the short answer." Morton described how he could cater to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning by simply having the skit performed in class. Further, if students created props to accompany the skit, tactile learning was also included. Morton highlighted yet another benefit to Saeed's skits in that interpersonal learning was strengthened through peer-to-peer learning. Morton defended this by saying,

> I don't know why, but somehow (students of) this generation, they tune out everyone above the age of 21 . . . and for some reason, I can say something, and they will completely ignore it--willingly or unwillingly. But then, when a 14-year old says it, and 'ahhh . . . they got it!,' You know they said the exact thing I said. So, whatever. That's the way it works.

Morton concluded, "We need to actually target all of those learning modalities."

Morton summarized skits' ability to foster an improved sense of classroom community through differentiation: "So, it allows me to assign different parts, be it actual character parts or production parts, to match my student body with what they want." He added, "And what usually happens when I do a full-on Saeed skit is afterwards people then want to take on different roles and experience different parts. Of course, I allow them to do this."

Morton revealed that he believed Saeed's skits helped students see multiple perspectives surrounding an event or issue. For example, he noted Saeed's skit dealing with the Proclamation of 1763 in which both two very different points of view are highlighted, King George III's perspective as well as the colonists' perspectives. Morton also mentioned his students clearly saw two different points of view on the temperance movement—a sort of typical male vs. female confrontation over an important social issue of the day—in the Saeed's skit *Temperance Throwdown*. Morton shared that he was surprised at the effectiveness of Saeed's skits in helping students differentiate points of view. "I wasn't expecting that one, actually," he noted.

Morton seemed to have passionate feelings regarding the effect that Saeed's skits had on his classroom environment when it came to interpersonal skills. Morton pointed

to his common belief that students "spend a lot of time laughing and poking fun and bullying each other in very unsafe ways." Morton added,

> I have discovered that, unlike my generation, these new students coming up . . . -- this body of Americans that are coming up--truly lack social skills. They want to engage with each other, they really do . . . they want to be accepted, they want to be valued, they want to be equal with their peers . . . but they truly are ignorant. They do not know how to talk to one another.

Morton pointed to one possible theory, the dependence on cell phones, to explain what he believed might be the cause of this lack of social (including communication) skills. He voiced his observation that because of this problem, the students

> further retract within their shells and (don't want to) engage with anything, let alone content. But with a Saeed skit, they can look at something that's written, that's school appropriate, that still makes them laugh, and so they're allowed to interact with their peers in a way that's appropriate and still enjoyable.

In addition, Morton believed that, importantly, "they get to laugh at each other in a safe way."

Morton remarked that he noticed positive effects related to social consciousness in his classroom while using Saeed's skits. Rather than necessarily promoting social consciousness, Morton felt that Saeed's skits "allow students to express" issues that they likely already understand. Morton maintained that

> students already understand the issues that we deal with in the United States. It's picked up. It's picked up from their parents, it's picked up from their peers, it's picked up from their environments, it's picked up from the neighborhoods they go

> to, it's picked up from the media that they watch . . . so they know already going in. They don't necessarily know what to do with it, and I feel that a lot of times they feel that they're powerless to make any changes. So, I won't say Saeed's skits promote it; I would say that it gives a conduit to express what's already there.

Morton remembered instances in which students seemed to have heightened social consciousness or increased across-era cultural awareness after a Saeed's skit. Morton gave an account of a time he used two different Saeed's skits covering social reform movements. Morton stated, "A lot of our students still deal with those issues today. Like temperance, or issues between the races, or gender inequality . . . so they can connect with that." Morton mentioned a Saeed's skit dealing with the Proclamation of 1763 in being able to help students be aware of the plight of people of the past, and the humanity they shared in common with other people in past eras. Morton explained, "So, history keeps repeating itself. And as historians, we know this, and we're able to take this to the students, and now I can say, 'Hey . . . how does the Proclamation of 1763 relate to today?" Morton continued by recognizing that many of the schools had large Hispanic populations, and that students may be able to notice that those in power in 1763 were attempting to control the migration of yet another group of people. Morton never shied away from the rich conversations that often start from these student epiphanies.

Morton indicated that Saeed's skits helped students understand that "there is no new 'news'; it's only old news. It's just happening to new people." He added, "What Saeed's skits allow to do is to take that historical context and teach it to the students," sometimes across vast spans of time. Morton observed an excellent example of how real-

world connections were made during what he termed "another excellent Saeed's skit dealing with the Lowell Mills in Massachusetts," entitled *It's Just Another Day in the Old Massachusetts Textile Mill*. Morton detailed that in the events of this skit,

> They come in and talk about Irish immigrants coming in and getting the lowest of the menial jobs that, quite frankly, Americans did not want to do . . . and the hazardous situation (regarding safety in the mills). And I'm able to have the students read it and say, "That's my parents . . . they came here as immigrants . . . they're taking a job that . . . natives in America did not want to do…

Morton concluded by saying, "And you know what? Some of it is dangerous. And so now, there's comparison and historical relevance with what's happening in the 1840s and in the early 21st century."

Morton suggested that Saeed's skits got to the heart of interdisciplinary collaboration, explaining, "You're dealing with drama, which, it's theater arts. So, I'm dealing with at its most basic core, ELA has invaded into the social studies classroom." Morton opined that the blending of ELA, reading, writing, and social studies was nothing strange, and "merge together wonderfully and beautifully anyway." He felt that Saeed's skits served "as a conduit for that to happen." He continued,

> What I think is more, perhaps, groundbreaking, is that we're now taking elective classes and interjecting them into the core classes, because now it's drama, it's performing arts. It's something that . . . it's not science, math, social studies, ELA. That's what's getting interjected. That's what a Saeed's skit does. Not just throwing in a core subject.

Morton related an experience he had during his second year of teaching. His

theater arts teacher mentor purposely coordinated the plays being learned and performed in her theater arts class with the content of the 8th grade American History classes. In one instance, she used *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868), a play describing the experiences of a family with several sisters dealing with the trials and tribulations of wartime. Morton used the students that the theater arts teacher had groomed to be class leaders in her class, and tasked them with leading similar activities in his American History classroom. He remembered,

> So, they then took the knowledge that they had from a professional theater arts professor, and then produced that same quality in their entire (history) groups. So, an entire class was indirectly receiving theater arts instruction. And so, when it came to producing it, all of the professional elements were there. It might as well have been a bunch of One-Act Plays. The props were there. The students were cheating out (at 45 degree angles) . . . they were projecting their voice. They were entering stage left. It was actually happening in a social studies classroom.

Morton described that in past school years he frequently used Saeed's skits in collaboration with his content-area partner, but that they were not able to do so anymore because of the district-mandated materials and constant testing that has become more intense in the last couple of years. When asked to postulate as to why there was not more interdisciplinary collaboration in schools, Morton iterated, "Because of the way the school system is set up." He then offered the following suggestion: "I think that if you removed the administration and let the teachers run the show, that it would happen a whole lot more."

The long arm of the district. Morton described increasing restrictions upon his

autonomy as a classroom teacher. He pointed to district mandates as the "number one requirement" determining the types of activities he uses in his classroom—whether or not he liked the activities—and that compliance (consistent use) was constantly being monitored by administration via walkthrough evaluations. Morton stressed that he was "willing to comply, because I am an employee, not the employer. So, I'm going to do what I'm asked to do. But within the bounds, I'm going to try to get in as much as possible."

Morton expressed that he liked to use activities of his own choosing whenever it is possible for him to do so. He intimated that implementing activities of his own choosing fostered more student engagement than the district-mandated activities when he stated, "Outside of this (district mandate), when it's my choice, I like to use activities of my own choosing as much as I can. I much prefer a class that's engaged on topic to a class that's not." Morton described that if not implementing district-mandated activities, he would certainly be "doing something that would be connected to the arts or humanities…," such as Saeed's skits. He continued, "And I have yet, and I pray that I never, have an administrator just flat-out tell me, 'No, you will not do that."

When asked about the district-mandated activities, Morton explained that they were part of what could be described as an online textbook by a major publishing company. Morton stated that this online textbook had some redeeming features, such as occasional project-based activities, but that in his personal experience only about one out of twelve activities was what he would call "engaging" or "non-traditional." Morton described the online textbook as containing between half and three-fourths very traditional-type activities, such as readings, biographies, quizzes, tests, and "flipped"

videos, (to which he referred as "baby lectures") which were mostly comprised of "standard, traditional text" and were not particularly engaging for students. Morton described the online textbook as mostly being designed for individual student use. Morton offered that "In fact, I could, if I were a student, go through the online textbook program without ever having to talk to another student." Morton spoke of his optimistic belief that the online textbook might be improved with some "tweaks" and that he had reached out to the publisher to offer his suggestions. One problem Morton acknowledged with the online textbook was that "it's pretty dry. I don't know why." He commented, "I think that with further time, I might be able to morph or evolve the online textbook into something usable."

Morton estimated that this online textbook was utilized approximately 80% of the school day, and that perhaps 20% of the time was remaining for him to implement activities of his own choosing. Within that 20%, Morton stated that some of that time was taken up by testing, testing preparation, and other test-related activities that were mandated by the school. Therefore, the time teachers had use activities of their own choosing was extremely limited. He admitted to sometimes "cutting the online textbook short to use the rest of the period" for what he wants. When originally asked what types of activities he normally used in the classroom, Morton did not mention traditional activities at all, even though he estimated that 80% of his time is consumed with this very traditional online textbook. When asked why that was, Morton replied, "Because it's understood . . . it's the accepted norm."

Morton was asked to estimate how much of his teaching was consumed with the use of this mandated online textbook; he stated, "The truth is that (the online textbook)

gets used 80% of my school day." Because of the time constraints created by the district-mandated use of this online textbook, Morton explained that he could implement student-centered activities "very little," except for a few project-based activities included in the textbook. Morton maintained optimism regarding these project-based activities, which he described as refreshingly engaging and applicable to the students' real lives, including to the future world of work. He discussed one such activity as being a collaborative, student-centered activity revolving around the design of a website covering an aspect of the Civil War. About these, Morton appeared to be maintaining an optimistic outlook. He quipped: "I'm developing a few of those, and so far so good. We'll see how that turns out. [What they are creating] is very good for 14-year-olds." Morton stressed that this positive experience was not the norm regarding what the online textbook software typically offers, reiterating that it was only one activity out of twelve.

When asked about how often he implemented arts-integrative activities such as art, music, dance, and theater arts (including skits), and why, Morton became very animated, saying that "the why is simple: to engage students." He then claimed that if the online textbook takes up 80% of his teaching time, the other 20% of the time would be dedicated to "something that would be connected to the arts or humanities." He then added a caveat to that statement: he said "Outside of testing."

Morton acknowledged that a significant amount of the precious 20% in which he could choose his own activities was consumed with testing, test preparation/review, data analysis, test correction, and other test-related activities. Therefore, Morton agreed that he chose his own activities significantly less than 20% of the time. Morton detailed,

We do 4 'snapshots', 3 9-week assessments, 1 mock, and the STAAR. That's

> what . . . 9 exams? 9? That's 9 days gone testing, and then how many days reviewing . . . who knows? Yeah. It's a lot. I would say that of the 20% (remaining after mandated activities), we're probably doing a quarter that . . . so maybe 5% for testing-slash-preparing for testing.

Morton acknowledged that the ubiquitous testing data that was the focus of so much school district attention, and which was being used to judge many teachers, students, administrators, and even school districts, is probably not scientifically valid or reliable.

Morton admitted that "there is always unspoken pressure to conform." He continued,

> I guess, like the aforementioned online textbook. But I tend to ignore all that. And I'm willing to comply because I am an employee, not the employer. So, I'm going to do what I'm asked to do. But within the bounds, I'm going to try to get in as much as possible. And I have yet, and I pray that I never, have an administrator just flat-out tell me, 'No, you will not do that.'

When asked to name some of the specific ways that district administrators attempt to solicit conformity, Morton easily listed a couple of the most-used tactics. The first had to do with eliciting sympathy based upon how much the district spent on particular programs. Morton gave an example of what teachers were told:

> The district spent X . . . I forget the amount of money . . . on it, and it is a district expectation that this will be used in the classroom, in conjunction with the Chromebooks, which the district also spent Y amount of money on.

Morton added, "And they check . . . they do walkthroughs. I have to show reports that (my) students have logged on to the district-mandated online textbook." Morton went on

to describe special meetings—so official that he received a calendar invite—which he was supposed to attend in order to present copies of these reports to an assistant principal, Sue Press (pseudonym). Upper administration personnel, such as the digital specialist (a woman named Bea Stallion [pseudonym]), "come around once a grading period," Morton explained.

Morton reported that only one other teacher on his campus used the exact same version of the mandated online social studies textbook, and that another teacher, "Jack Leatherpants" (pseudonym), handled the directives in a manner similar to Morton. Jack basically followed the directives, but tried to implement activities of his own choosing in the limited time he had available to do so. Morton explained, "I can assure you (Jack) does not use it exclusively; he does bring in materials that he's used forever." Morton further stated that there were a couple of other teachers in another grade level that were about to start using the online textbook, and that he had no knowledge how they would be implementing it, or to what extent they would follow the administrator directives.

Morton opined that there were some redeeming qualities to the mandated online textbook. For example, he believed that it imparted accurate content and that there were occasional project-based activities that he believed were useful and collaborative. However, he did not like having limited time in which to implement activities of his own choosing as well as the overwhelmingly traditional and unengaging nature of the vast majority of the activities it contains. Lastly, Morton related that the administrator directives related to this mandated online textbook were contributing to a less-than-ideal work environment. Overall, Morton joked, "I mean, it is basically a textbook at the end of the day. But implementing the material . . . well, it's not a Saeed's skit. Let's put it

that way."

To have the freedom to try unique activities, such as Saeed's skits, Morton believed that three prerequisites had to be in place. Morton believed that individual teacher confidence, including confidence in content knowledge, was a factor in breeding creativity in the classroom. Having a group of "students that are willing to play along" is also a factor. However, Morton pointed to a third critical factor: "You need to have an administration that's willing to let you go off the deep end . . . to take a shot and see what works and what doesn't." He slipped deep in thought for a moment, before emerging to pronounce,

> If I had to rank the issues that affect my ability to make decisions as a professional, number one would be micromanagement, and number two would be testing. Micromanagement is actually even more of a problem than testing. Although, don't get me wrong…I am all-too aware that the micromanagement is as bad as it is because of testing.

Reactions to the use of Saeed's skits. Morton reported that his colleagues were generally positive regarding his use of Saeed's skits in his history classroom, and seemed eager to try it in their classrooms. Morton noted that his colleague Jack Leatherpants had been using Saeed's skits in his history classroom for some time already. He indicated that there were other colleagues who had expressed interest in having skits to use in their own content areas. When Morton's colleagues noticed the skits being performed in his classroom, they did not necessarily know that they were Saeed's skits. In fact, some thought that Morton wrote them himself. Morton reported that one of his colleagues, a math teacher named Onnah Tangent (pseudonym), asked him to write some math skits

that she could use in her classroom. Morton was encouraged by the willingness of teachers like Miss Tangent to approach him to ask about the skits. He added that

> The only negative (response) is . . . they're not sure how they can implement (skits) in their room. That's what scares them off. It's not that they're opposed to it, they just don't know how to implement it. Which is a fair obstacle, and it's a fair--I wouldn't say criticism--but it's a fair observation on their part. It's not necessarily easiest to do. And Saeed's skits are limited to one of the four core subjects.

Regarding administrators' reactions to his use of skits in Morton's history classroom, he described his belief that, in general, administrators "really enjoy seeing originality being placed into the classroom" and were "appreciative that I'm trying something maybe outside the realm of traditional teaching." He also stated that when administrators come in and observe skits happening in his classroom, "They like that it's crossing over into the ELA side of things . . . and that students are engaged." He further noted:

> The only negative that I got from an administrator towards doing more live drama is an administrator asked me, 'How do you know the students really learned that through all the laughter?" My response was simply, "They can write about it, they can talk about it, they know about it.

Morton shared his feeling that administrators were likely not to blame for the loss of autonomy that prevented teachers from using activities like Saeed's skits. Very matter-of-factly, he continued, "They're just the messengers." Morton spelled out his reasoning: "Garbage rolls downhill. And it's coming from two places . . . Washington,

D.C. and Austin, TX. Let's just be very clear where all of this stuff is coming from." He further defended school administrators:

> There's not an assistant principal or superintendent saying, 'Nope . . . I'm gonna write all of these TEKS, and this is what you're gonna do and I'm gonna make your test.' That's not where it's coming from. They're trying to jump through the same hoops as we are.

Morton put in a lot of thinking about this subject, and postulated that many administrators may be as unhappy as the teachers. When asked why he had come to that conclusion, Morton explained: "Well, because there are only two assistant principal positions at this middle school, but this school year they've already lost three. You do the math."

Morton's miscellaneous musings. Morton theorized about teachers who took risks and were willing to attempt unique ways to engage students and build a sense of community in the classroom, such as what he believes Saeed's skits provide. He reminisced fondly about the vast freedom and autonomy he was gifted during his first year, and that he had been befriended by a supportive mentor, but did not feel that either of these factors was necessarily the reason for his "no-limit" outlook in the classroom. He stated about teachers who take risks in the classroom, "I don't think it's because they're first-year teachers." He also did not feel that confidence or content knowledge was the cause of teacher risk-taking:

> Or that they're confident in their subject. When I taught math, I was a first-year teacher. It was my first year teaching math. I didn't completely understand everything on the TEKS at the time. I was having to read to see what I was supposed to teach the kids. And that was one of my most creative years I've ever

had.

Morton then commented to the researcher, "You're doing world history as a first-year now. You're having to learn some of it on the go. And that doesn't change your desire to want to try new things in the classroom," to which the researcher replied with an emphatic "No." Morton concluded, "So, it's not your level of experience with content or teaching; it's just are you willing to try and fail."

Additionally, Morton provided his hypothesis regarding why arts integrative activities such as Saeed's skits do not get more credence from administrators and politicians, and why the testing and data obsession seemed to be festering, unfettered. He submitted, "That's what they're doing. Now, I'm gonna tell you why they're doing it." Morton then continued, "Your theater performing arts, visual arts, auditory arts, all of those type of arts things cannot be tested. Therefore, they cannot be standardized, and that's what they need to win re-elections and get money." Many people wondered why the testing obsession continues, even in the face of so much opposition; Morton attempted to make it less of a mystery. He added, "In other words, there's motivation. And like I tell my students, follow the money."

With regards to the constant fixation on testing and accountability, Morton offered his perspective on who really should be accountable to whom. He shared his thoughts that "(teachers) are not supposed to be accountable to the state. We're supposed to be accountable to the parent . . . at the end of the day. Morton quipped, "Now we're going on my soapbox…" He continued,

> You've got parents, you have the children, and you have the teachers. Those are the only three categories that can ever really add anything to education. Outside

> of that . . . nothing is going to add to it. You have a parent. They are a citizen of the United States. They have the freedom and the power and the popular sovereignty to control their destiny and the destiny of their offspring. I believe that they should be able to choose the teacher that they want, and the teacher should be able to teach them in whichever way they choose, and the teacher should be accountable to the parent, and if the parent likes, then the parent thumbs up . . . and if the parent doesn't, the parent should be able to yank the child (from the teacher's class). Anything outside that triad, it's just . . . inefficiency.

Personal experience with Saeed's skits. Morton stated that his own feelings, emotions, and general overall experience were enhanced by his implementation of Saeed's skits in his classroom. When asked to explain, Morton offered,

> The simple answer is: laughter. The long answer is joy at what was going on in my classroom. When it's going well, not only do you get the joy as a teacher . . . of "look, my students are learning . . . they're engaged in the material . . . they're having fun in my subject . . . but also the theater for theater's sake. I mean, the original purpose of theater was to entertain. And so, when students are doing theater, I am entertained. And because Saeed's skits tend to focus on the humorous sides . . . I mean, they are skits in the literal definition of the word . . . I laugh. And when 13, 14, 15, and 16-year year olds are doing comical, goofy, and crazy things, I laugh at them.

Morton recounted, "I'm definitely glad to have gotten hold of Saeed's skits."

Social justice through Saeed's skits. Morton defined social justice as "when something is done wrong, restoration is made. It's something that is equally applied,

which means everyone in that society has equal access to it." When Morton was asked whether he felt that social justice was encouraged in his classroom through the use of Saeed's skits, he stated,

> I think we need to go back to our working definition of it, that it's the society and that everyone has fair access to what we're dealing with . . . and if you look at that definition and apply a Saeed's skit implemented in the classroom, to that definition, then our answer is 'Yes'. Because was society--and by society I mean my classroom--was that benefitted by a Saeed's skit? Yes. And then the justice side . . . was it equitable for more students than it was with more traditional teaching? Then again, the answer is yes.

Morton contrasted the social justice-oriented environment in his classroom when using Saeed's skits with using traditional-type activities versus student-centered activities. Morton stated,

> In a Saeed's skit, everyone has access at the outset . . . at the start. In other words, everyone is on an even playing field . . . okay, maybe not truly even, but it's adjustable by the various parts and characters of a Saeed's skit. And every student would rather watch a play than write a paper.

Morton further described certain situations in his classroom that would necessitate the promotion of equity. He said, "In a traditional classroom, quite frankly, I have students that don't understand English. And so, if I give them textbook material to read, they're done without assistance." Morton suggested that for students who have poor reading skills, or

> simply don't like to read, for whatever reason, they've been turned off to it. But,

> they're going to choose not to engage with the material. So they're done. So the only ones that actually have access to the traditional textbook/literature sense is those who both have the ability to read English and the desire. Everyone else is done. Of course, if I go to something more student-centered, what I see is those same students that desire and have the ability to read will do so. And then they'll disseminate out to those that can't or those that won't.

Future plans for Saeed's skits. Morton stated that due to the time of the school year, he was almost finished with that year's scope and sequence:

> The curriculum is about done. So, this time we're actually going to use Saeed's skits as a review. As an overall… 'You understand the basics. Now, let's take it to a higher level.' And so, hopefully, this will lead to the retention of material.

Morton reported that over the course of a school year, he typically used Saeed's skits three ways: to introduce lessons, to teach lessons, and to review concepts; he plans to continue doing so.

Morton also had ideas about other ways that Saeed's skits could be used to benefit student engagement and sense of community. He commented that just as the skits seemed to be applicable to every time period in history, that he did not think the skits had to be limited only to "the realm of social studies." He expressed his vision: "I see this branching out into science, into ELA, and mathematics as well." Morton further detailed his idea of using one of the other strategies he loves (current events) and seeing what students might create if they were given the opportunity to do a skit-writing project based upon current events. Morton quipped, "We'll file that (idea) away for later…"

With regards to the online textbook that Morton had been dutifully implementing

in his classroom, even though it is not his choice, Morton was asked what possible solutions he felt teachers might attempt in order to better the current environment of micromanagement and mandated activities. He then became very solemn, before continuing with his grim outlook for the future:

> it goes back to teachers not being free to teach, and having the administrative environment allowing you to pursue more creative teaching methods . . . There used to be a time when the teacher made the test, so the teacher knew exactly what was on the test . . . and then, the teacher used whatever methods they chose to get their students ready for that test. We no longer live in that society. We live in this society.

Coping with district mandates and loss of autonomy. Morton offered his thoughts on what temporary actions teachers might undertake to continue using strategies such as Saeed's skits even in the face of widespread micromanagement. He remarked, "Well, the temporary action is just what we're (already) doing. You squeeze it in on the side. You pretty much do what you need to placate the mandated policy, and then you teach on the side." Although Morton was a very compliant employee, and tried to remain optimistic no matter what directives he is given, he briefly let on that he would "go back to World Geography" because it "no longer has an End-of-Course Exam (EOC)."

Social action brainstorming. Morton shared some informal thoughts on solutions to the current problems in public education, which increasingly affect teachers' autonomy to implement the activities they see fit (such as Saeed's skits). He mulled the reasons why there was not more interdisciplinary collaboration in schools, making the unscientific observation that "the way the school system is set up" prevents it. He

hypothesized, “I think that if you removed the administration and let the teachers run the show, that (inter/intradisciplinary collaboration) would happen a whole lot more.” Morton was resigned to the unfortunate political realities controlling education, and seemed to have adopted an “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” approach to the online textbook. Morton explained that even though he was being forced to use the textbook that contains overwhelmingly traditional activities, he chose to reach out to the publisher to offer his suggestions on how to morph it into something usable.” He joked about the publishing company, “(They) could include Saeed’s skits into their materials, and the problem would be solved.”

Data Analysis

The interviews and focus group session were aimed at gathering data that was pertinent to the goal of this research. From the recordings made during the interviews, the researcher created electronic transcript files. An in-depth reading of the interview transcripts was undertaken, and narratives (or “stories”) were then created from the information. All the stories (the researcher’s personal story as well as teacher participant stories generated from interviews and focus group session) were analyzed using the same technique. Miles and Huberman’s (1994) coding method was the inspiration for this study’s data analysis. To ensure that teacher participants’ input was understood and portrayed accurately and fairly, contact was maintained with them throughout all stages of this collaborative process, a technique known as “member-checking.”

Miles and Huberman suggested “creating a provisional ‘start list’ of codes prior to fieldwork (1994). That list comes from the conceptual framework, list of research questions, hypotheses, problem areas, and/or key variables that the researcher brings to

the study" (p. 58). Because there were very definite social justice themes already delineated in the major research question (i.e., progressive vs. traditional, student engagement, and sense of community), these themes conveniently served as the provisional start list of codes. Within this start list of codes, various sub-categories already existed, and others emerged during the coding cycle; in addition, completely new categories also revealed themselves, while others had to be combined or deleted altogether. Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Miles and Huberman, 1994) discussed various types of "coding procedures later in the study cycle," such as filling in, extension, bridging, and surfacing. All these techniques helped the researcher negotiate what Miles and Huberman called "codes that emerge progressively during data collection" (p. 62). Overall, the coding techniques espoused by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Miles and Huberman, 1994) were very appropriate for this study and allowed the researcher to adapt as necessitated by the data analysis. This enabled a clear, accurate, and realistic portrayal of the teacher participants' stories.

Trustworthiness of data analysis. In order to give this process more trustworthiness, all aspects of the analysis were shared, from interview transcripts, to the stories I pieced together from transcribed data, to the themes I extracted from the stories, etc. with teacher participants so that they could have the opportunity to identify any misinterpretations on my part (Creswell, 2007, Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, Lincoln and Guba, as cited in Shenton, 2004, Miles and Huberman, 1994). During the member-checking process, both teacher participants voiced being very satisfied with the accuracy and fairness of the transcripts, narratives, and themes generated by the researcher.

Findings Related to Research Question

Preferred types of teaching strategies. The researcher (Saeed), Gwendolyn Sage, and Morton Wise used a wide array of teaching strategies when given the choice to do so. The activities chosen fell into a wide range of categories touching upon all learning modalities. For example, there were many arts integration genres of progressive/arts integration activities, such as Saeed's skits, and other activities such as raps, songs, haiku, drawings/cartoons, games, pantomimes, puppet shows, storyboard drawings, etc.). Progressive/student-centered activities were also common among these three teachers (group collaborative reading, group primary source analysis with discussion, debates, discussion, student choice projects, projects such as on Animodo, etc.). There were many activities that potentially fell under student-centered or traditional, depending upon the manner in which the assignment was carried out (note-taking with graphic organizers, computer-based activities, writing, videos, current events, Power Points, book reading, posters, exit ticket essays, hands-on group activities, ELA-type analysis of a play using plot, setting, etc.). Gwendolyn used one activity that was a straight rote memorization-based traditional activity, "*130 History Facts*"; however, she used it in a limited capacity in hopes it may help even one student. It was not representative of the typical activities Gwendolyn used in her classroom.

Overall, there were some activities that were used by all three teachers: Saeed's skits, other arts-integrative activities, discussion-based activities, student choice activities, ELA-integrative activities, and videos. Progressive activities such as arts-integrative activities (including Saeed's skits) were popular among all three teachers, and they all stated their belief in their effectiveness. Traditional activities were not popular

among any of the three teachers, and, in fact, were only cited once. In addition, all three teachers made statements about their belief in catering to student individuality and choice, and often allowed students to propose or choose among assignments.

Saeed shared her preference for progressive/arts integrative activities, especially her skits: "After skits, evidence of understanding is much, much deeper than it would be after a textbook reading, or even a group activity." Gwendolyn also ranked arts integrative activities at the top of her list. She noted that with traditional/student-centered activities: "Except those that have a passion for history, it's gone." Gwendolyn added that "If I did not have the ability to allow my kids to participate in (Saeed's) skits where they could feel it and own it and everything, they would have just tuned out." Gwendolyn also described Saeed's skits this way: "I think they're a vital tool. It gives them the ability to live history, to express it, and put themselves in (history) . . . it's that connection." Morton also indicated that his belief in the superiority of arts integration activities. He stated about traditional and student-centered activities:

> I have students that don't understand English . . . so (with) the textbook . . . they're done without assistance . . . other students who . . . have poor reading skills (will) choose not to engage with the material. So they're done. The only ones that have access to the traditional textbook . . . is those who both have the ability to read English and the desire." Morton offered his thoughts on student-centered activities: "...those same students that desire and have the ability to read will do so. And then they'll disseminate out to those that can't or won't.

Finally, Morton opined on Saeed's skits: "In a Saeed's skit, everyone has access at the outset . . . everyone is on an even playing field . . . it's adjustable by the various parts and

characters . . . and every student would rather watch a play than write a paper."

Student engagement with Saeed's skits. The researcher and teacher participants related their perceptions on the impact of Saeed's skits upon student engagement in their history classrooms.

The researcher's perceptions. In terms of student engagement behaviors, Saeed gave evidence in the form of comments made by past students:

- "The skits help me learn . . . it's like you're having a conversation with another person." (R.V., student)
- "I remember things best when I'm interacting or laughing." (T.W., student)
- "Skits help me because you mix fun and learning together . . . it keeps me more (awake) rather than reading out of a textbook." (A.S., student)

Saeed also reported that students often make comments asking to do the skit again, asking to get out of another class so they can continue doing the skits, asking to try out different character roles, etc. According to Saeed, after a skit was complete, students "genuinely wanted" to engage in discussion. Students also became competitive for character roles, often asking to do the skit again so that they got an opportunity to play their desired parts.

Saeed reported that there was also evidence of students' engagement in terms of content retention or memory after Saeed's skits. She described the level of discussion as revealing a "depth of knowledge" after a skit that allowed "sophisticated discussions" where all students were able to contribute; in addition, the students could "move beyond the events described in the skit with more ease." Similarly, Saeed reported that when she used one of her skits to introduce a topic, students seemed to understand the remaining

material more easily. Saeed found that this transferred over to tests and quizzes: "Students were able to recognize the concepts covered in the skits, resulting in better performance on tests and quizzes." A former student, A.S., noted: "It's easy to remember something when you have a funny memory attached to the information." Furthermore, students have never had any difficulty separating the fictional elements from the factual content in the skits. Saeed once wrote a skit for her husband's 6th grade history class, and noticed that "His students were able to easily grasp the ramifications of NAFTA at a much deeper level."

Finally, with regards to the student engagement aspect "love of education," Saeed described that her skits seemed to "spark a sense of wonder regarding what particular events may portend for the future." Overall, Saeed felt that her skits have a positive effect on student engagement behaviors, including feelings of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and/or passion; content retention, memory, and/or comprehension; and/or helping to foster a love of education in general.

Gwendolyn's perceptions. Gwendolyn reported student comments as evidence of student engagement behaviors after participating in Saeed's skits, adding, "They did it, they felt it" and "they had a blast." She stated that students "would approach her to ask her to do him or her a favor and 'get me out of such-and-such class' so that I can watch that class do their skit." Students also asked: "Are we gonna do another play? And can I have words?" Gwendolyn described students coming by her classroom later in the school day, showing interest in whether other classes had gotten to do a skit. Further, Gwendolyn noted that students, including reluctant and/or ELL students, talked about the skits after leaving her classroom, sometimes to other staff and administrators.

Gwendolyn remembered one occasion in which students returned to ask her throughout the day (after a skit), "When are we gonna see the video?" Next, Gwendolyn stated that "you could hear them talking amongst each other in the hallways" after a skit. Finally, Gwendolyn explained that students often added their own flavor to character roles.

Gwendolyn also reported that her students showed increased student engagement in terms of content retention/memory after a Saeed's skit. She shared: "After Saeed's skits, students were able to write about important information on exit ticket essays." In addition, Gwendolyn felt that Saeed's skits help topics learned "linger" in students' minds, because they "talk about it" afterwards.

With regard to student engagement-love of education, Gwendolyn also observed evidence. She reported that "students wrote emails to her years later reminiscing about the skits, asking why other teachers in high school hadn't used the skits, and expressing that (Saeed's skits) would have helped them learn history concepts better."

Overall, Gwendolyn noted that Saeed's skits helped her class improve in terms of student engagement, including content retention and love of education.

Morton's perceptions. Morton claimed to have received a significant amount of student commentary after doing Saeed's skits in his class. Students asked to do the skit over again, to do skits for the rest of the year, to stay and not go to the next class, to stay in Mr. Wise's class all day because the other class is boring, and to play a different role next time. Students also commented, "Mr. Wise is the best teacher on campus." Morton reported comments reflective of enthusiasm about the skit, such as, "I liked when X (character) did Y (action)." Lastly, Morton reported that students frequently wanted "to take on different roles and experience different parts" after a Saeed skit.

When it came to student engagement-content retention/memory, Morton stated that "every time I ask comprehension questions, I get very positive feedback." He also claimed that students took an assessment "a week after doing a Saeed's skit," and scored "well over 90% accuracy" on questions that had been covered in the skit. Lastly, Morton reported using Google Forms questionnaires to generate real-time data during a lesson, after Saeed's skits. He stated that he showed this data to administrators in the form of a pie chart and that they were able to see "the comprehension and understanding" displayed by students post-Saeed's skit.

Overall, Morton expressed that Saeed's skits helped him foster student engagement, including content retention and love of education, in his history classroom.

Sense of Community with Saeed's skits. "Sense of Community" by itself refers to a sense of belonging or connection to community. For the purposes of this study, it also included inclusion/differentiation, addressing multiple intelligences, highlighting multiple perspectives, heightening cultural awareness, promoting social consciousness, and making real-world connections.

Researcher's perceptions. The researcher shared her perceptions on the impact of Saeed's skits on sense of community in her history classroom. Saeed reported that her skits helped promote an environment in which every student had something to contribute to the classroom learning community. In addition, she gave an example of a post-temperance movement skit discussion which was an opportunity to bond with her students, building a sense of community and trust. Saeed shared that her skits made inclusion and differentiation easier (including catering to the multiple intelligences) by delivering the content to a group of students with varying learning styles. ELL students

in the classroom were able to access the content, practice speaking, and fully participate in the classroom community. They also determined character motivations much more easily.

Saeed felt that social consciousness and cultural awareness were improved as well. She described a male student's comment during the *Mo' Sugar Mo' Problemz* skit, which revolved around the Sugar Act of 1764. When King George's fancy clothing was described within the skit, one student made a comment, something to the effect of, "Those players always want to use the little guy" (to continue making endless profit). Students determined multiple perspectives or different points of view with more clarity, according to Saeed, thanks to her skits. She stated that the skits helped students imagine what historical figures might have been doing behind the scenes and what might have motivated their actions. Also, she reported that "skits concisely revealed significant aspects of the often convoluted topic of conflict and war while illuminating the hidden underlying motivations and perspectives of the major players" (Saeed, 2016, p. 1). Next, students seemed to easily pick up character motivations from the skits, which made the discussion rich and meaningful. One example was the Saeed's skit *Temperance Throwdown*, in which students understood the "viewpoints of those who wanted to continue having access to alcohol and the perspectives of the women who protested it." Lastly, according to Saeed's colleague Joe Lingo, ELL students "were able to pick up character intent from the skits, such as relaying why the character acted in a certain way or made a certain decision." Further, students in the New Arrival Center incorporated "conversations and interaction centered around an academic topic". In relation to interpersonal skills, Saeed stated that her skits also helped students improve. One former

student wrote: “I remember things best when I’m interacting or laughing.” Also, students seemed willing to perform the skits for each other and for other classes.

Saeed’s skits also promoted relevance and real-world connections. Saeed stated that her skits “play up the story in such a way that it is more relatable to the students. Also, as a teacher, Saeed promoted “getting to know historical figures as if they were alive,” as evidenced during the Saeed’s skit *Temperance Throwdown*. After this skit, students willingly brought in personal family situations involving alcohol abuse that had presented serious challenges in their own families. Students understood why the temperance movement mattered to them personally and how they were connected across time and space with these people that shared the same challenges as they do. Interdisciplinary collaboration was also propagated by Saeed’s skits. Saeed reported several partnerships over a long period of time: a collaboration with a theater arts teacher, a collaboration with a New Arrival Center teacher, and collaboration with content-area colleagues. Saeed’s skits were a common thread among the collaborations. The theater arts teacher used Saeed’s skits in his classroom, thus supporting what his students were learning in history class. Saeed’s skits were implemented in the New Arrival Center, helping those students enjoy school and have access to the content while practicing English. Skits were often used in various ways among Saeed and her two content-area colleagues to promote student learning. Saeed was not using her skits at present due to her recent move to a new school (a high school) and a new content area (World History), but her current school’s environment was greatly conducive to teacher choice.

In all aspects of sense of community, Saeed reported that the skits she had written and implemented in her classroom demonstratively positive effects.

Gwendolyn's perceptions. Gwendolyn shared her perceptions on the impact of Saeed's skits on sense of community in her history classroom. Gwendolyn described the environment in her classroom when doing Saeed's skits as free of barriers to student participation, thus fostering sense of community. "All the walls are torn down when you do a play . . . everyone is part of it . . . and they can own it." Gwendolyn explained that she was easily used Saeed's skits to differentiate in her classroom. She noted that the linguistically strong students were writers for commercials between skit scenes, creative students made props, and expressive, artsy students usually wanted key roles. She provided extension-type activities that were suitable for gifted and talented when she allowed students to use Saeed's skits as examples from which they could write their own plays revolving around new or more current aspects of topics they had enjoyed throughout the year.

Gwendolyn described her students being able to clearly see the distinct viewpoints of both Stephen F. Austin and Santa Anna in the Saeed's skit *Dealin' Wit' A Dictator*. She noted, "They made that connection. Now, the people were alive, they were not just a name on a piece of paper." Social consciousness and cultural awareness were also bolstered, according to Gwendolyn. She described how students often "put a little bit of their cultural slant" into their skit performances, which helped all students in the classroom get a taste of aspects of another culture. Furthermore, she pointed out that students became more socially conscious, as they noticed shades of sexual harassment of poor, female, immigrant textile workers in the Saeed's skit *Just Another Day in the Ol' Massachusetts Textile Mill*. She characterized her students' experiences during this play as understanding the injustices that occurred, being able to visualize how history has

changed over time, and generating ideas about how to prevent abuses from happening in the future. Therefore, students were beginning to think about social action.

With regards to interpersonal skills, Gwendolyn described students who had hardly ever participated in class before start becoming gradually more eager to take on bigger roles with more speaking parts in Saeed's skits. She stated: … "they come out of that shell that they were in" as they gradually exemplified a desire to take on larger character roles. Saeed's skits also promoted relevance and real-world connections in Gwendolyn's classroom. She relayed a riveting interaction between herself and a male African American student who had volunteered to play the role of a slave in the Saeed's skit *Real Texas Talk Show*. After the skit, the student approached her, and they talked one-on-one. She asked him how he felt during the role. He answered, "I'm so grateful for the changes over time. Ms. Sage, that would be really hard."

Gwendolyn was sure that student collaboration was also encouraged by Saeed's skits. Students in her classes began showing enthusiasm with regard to supporting or showing interest in what other classes were doing with Saeed's skits in their classrooms. Gwendolyn characterized the environment after a skit as abuzz with excitement: You could hear them talk among each other in the hallways…and ask, "Can you get me out of class so I can watch that class do their skit?" You could see it." She concluded: "It was like we were our little neighborhood with all the little subdivisions, all wanting to come together for the good…because they wanted to see each other's class do it."

Gwendolyn reported that interdisciplinary collaboration at her school was almost non-existent, and that other teachers seem to be primarily focused on themselves and their own STAAR testing data. She reported that on the occasions when she approached

colleagues to collaborate, they displayed various behaviors that indicated their nervousness or reluctance to do so. Other teachers also voiced their disapproval of veering from the strict district curriculum calendar and common departmental activities. There was one new math teacher who visited Gwendolyn's classroom, and witnessed the students performing Saeed's skit *Temperance Throwdown.* At that time, the teacher stated her wish that there were plays for math similar to Saeed's skits, and that she would do them even though she was supposed to be adhering closely to a curriculum calendar. There was no indication of whether this teacher was ever successful in finding another author's skits to use in her math classroom. Overall, Gwendolyn did not mention being involved in any interdisciplinary collaboration experiences that actually transpired.

In almost all aspects of sense of community, with the exception of actual inter- and intradisciplinary collaboration among teachers, Gwendolyn noted that Saeed's skits had a positive impact in her classroom. However, she did indicate that one teacher had shown interest in Saeed's skits for her content area.

Morton's perceptions. Morton shared his perceptions on the impact of Saeed's skits on sense of community in his history classroom.

Morton explained that in his opinion, Saeed's skits helped facilitate the students in his classroom in feeling that "I have value here . . . I actually have value to this educational process." Further, he strongly believed that Saeed's skits helped to "break the ice with me," fostering a sense of belonging and community which included the teacher. Lastly, Morton believed that because, in his view, Saeed's skits "put students on an even playing field," they would more easily feel a part of the classroom community.

Morton shared that inclusion and differentiation were easy to implement with

Saeed's skits. According to Morton, this stemmed from the "way that they're actually composed." He elaborated, explaining that the class clown-types could get the main parts in the skit, while shy students remained in their desks and read the narrator's part. Strong readers had bigger parts in the skit, while weak readers had fewer lines. "Behind the scenes" type personalities were assigned tasks such as prop management, stage set-up, filmer, etc. Morton further touted the benefits of Saeed's skits in catering to the multiple intelligences. He listed visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, and peer-to-peer (interpersonal) as all being accommodated through Saeed's skits. Regarding the peer-to-peer benefit, Morton continued, "Students will sometimes listen to each other more than they'll listen to an adult."

Social consciousness and cultural awareness were increased in his classroom, according to Morton. He stated that with regards to social consciousness issues, students were probably already keenly aware of issues they and their families face; however, Saeed's skits allowed them a venue to express issues that they want to express. Morton noted that students seemed to gain cross-era cultural awareness by using Saeed's skits, such as being able to compare what was "happening in the 1840s with the early 21st century."

Morton described how his students had a much easier time determining varying points of view as a result of Saeed's skits. He gave an example of the Saeed's skit *Pullin' the Strings* where students were shown two different scenes; one depicted the feelings of King George III, and the other depicted the reaction of British colonists in the New World. Interpersonal skills were also improved by Saeed's skits, according to Morton. He strongly felt that Saeed's skits allowed students to "laugh at each other in safe ways."

In addition, Morton offered his view that "this generation lacks social skills. They want to engage with each other but don't know how . . . Saeed's skits allow them to interact in a way that's appropriate and still enjoyable."

Saeed's skits propagated real-world connections in Morton's classroom. He shared his experience with the Saeed's skit *Just Another Day in the Ol' Massachusetts Textile Mill,* which depicted deplorable worker conditions in textile mills in mid-1800s Massachusetts, which disproportionately affected the poor, immigrants, women, and children. He iterated, students read it and say, "That's my parents . . . they came as immigrants . . . they're taking a job that natives in America did not want to do." Furthermore, he explained that some of the jobs that students' parents do are similarly dangerous. Morton concluded, "Students begin to realize they have something in common with the Irish immigrants." Morton also felt that students deal with many social issues today, and would therefore find Saeed's skits relatable. Morton gave another example of relevance and real-world connections in the Saeed's skit *Pullin' the Strings,* in which students noticed that those in power in 1763 were attempting to control the migration of another group of people.

With regards to interdisciplinary collaboration with colleagues, Morton felt that Saeed's skits made it easier to accomplish. He felt that skits were basically an English-Language Arts-type activity, and that "ELA and social studies blend well anyway;" however, that Saeed's skits were innovative in that they inject an elective into a core class instead of the other way around. Morton described collaborating with a theater arts teacher at his former school. The theater arts teacher purposely coordinated the plays she was doing in her classroom with what was being taught in social studies class. At his

present school, he indicated that in the past there had been an atmosphere of teamwork and flexibility with his content-area colleague, and that Saeed's skits had been useful to them in many ways as they attempted to do what was best for their history students. However, this school year, they had hardly used them at all due to lack of both time and teacher choice.

In almost all aspects of sense of community, Morton reported that Saeed's skits have had positive effects in his classroom. In intra-/interdisciplinary collaboration, Morton reported that although several teachers approached him to express interest in skits they saw him do in his classroom, no actual collaboration had transpired during this school year due to a change in environment (i.e., increased micromanagement).

Social justice definitions and perceptions. Teachers shared their perceptions on the social justice impact of Saeed's skits in their history classrooms.

Saeed's perceptions. Saeed described social justice as "love," and that inherent in love is that no one is left out; every student in the class needed to feel cared for. And in order for that to happen in the context of learning history, then all students needed to feel that what they are learning is important to them personally. She described that she felt she achieved social justice because her fun and user-friendly skits helped students access the content and participate in the classroom community. Saeed's skits helped her feel more powerful in fostering social justice within her own classroom. "I know for certain that I can continue to make nonstop meaningful change in my own classroom by simply being who I am . . . and that excites me."

Gwendolyn's perceptions. Gwendolyn described her view of social justice: "Equality . . . opportunities for all, regardless of . . . financial status . . . color of their skin

. . . religious beliefs, across the board…fairness and consistency regardless of who." She felt that social justice was promoted in her classroom:

> Definitely. Definitely (in response to whether social justice was encouraged as a result of Saeed's skits). All the walls are torn down when you do a play. Everyone is part of it. And they can own it, and bring in their real life to that character and make it their own . . . across the board, they were able to do it, and see it, and feel it . . . and like I said, it brought it to life for them.

Morton's perceptions. In Morton's opinion,

> Social, of course, is dealing with society--people, humans, or human geography . . . and then justice means fair . . . it means that when something is done wrong, restoration is made. It's something equally applied, which means that everyone in that society has equal access to it.

He referred directly back to his definition when describing his belief that Saeed's skits improved social justice conditions in his classroom:

> If you look at that definition and apply a Saeed's skit implemented in the classroom, to that definition, then our answer is 'Yes.' Because the society--and by society, I mean classroom, that benefitted by a Saeed's skit? Yes. And then the justice side . . . was it equitable for more students than it was with more traditional teaching? Then again, the answer is yes.

Emergent Themes Derived from Data Analysis

Data analysis revealed several issues that recurred frequently among all three teachers. These issues were not part of the research question; however, teachers reported them to be germane to the research question. All three teachers agreed that overtesting,

micromanagement, and district-mandated materials were major factors in their reported loss of autonomy in the classroom. In addition, teacher comments related to mentoring and its potential to shape new teacher worldviews on arts integration, including skits, were significant enough to merit further discussion.

Overtesting. All three teachers revealed substantial disapproval of testing and related issues (control of curriculum, benchmark testing, relentless testing cycle, incessant data mining, data meetings, etc.) and their deleterious effect on teacher ability to implement activities of their own choosing, such as Saeed's skits. All three teachers also indicated that testing negatively affected the social justice environment due to unfairness caused by sub-par testing design, changing testing conditions from teacher to teacher, lack of control over who could see tests before they were administered—all of which provoked participants' concern over misplaced trust that district staff had placed in scientifically invalid or unreliable testing data. Furthermore, lack of collaboration, an unnecessarily competitive, "teacher-against-teacher" mindset, and the widespread judgement of students, teachers, administrators, and school districts based upon the data gleaned from these tests were all noted as serious issues. These factors contributed to teacher feelings of alienation and frustration over their loss of autonomy.

Micromanagement and district-mandated materials. The two teacher participants, both middle school teachers, discussed the increasing encroachment of the district upon their ability to run their classroom as they saw fit, by mandating certain materials for use in the classroom. These district-mandated materials, namely, an online textbook (by two different publishers), had significant effects upon teacher ability to use activities of their own choosing. Gwendolyn stated with certainty her feelings that if she

used the mandated textbook as ordered, she would have no time to insert her own individuality into her history classroom. Morton estimated that at least 85% of what he does in his classroom was based in the mandated online textbook. Both teacher participants reported that they had been pressured to use the online textbook, in some way, by administration; in one case, by reminding teachers how much textbooks had cost the district, and in another case by forcing teachers to keep daily logs proving that their students were using them. Researcher Saeed, who now works at an Early College, described having experienced increasingly similar conditions over the past several years at her former school, also a middle school. In addition, she mentioned reports from several of her colleagues that similar conditions (in terms of requirements to use an online textbook) were present at the regular high school, although not at the Early College (which is part of the high school, but in a separate building and under different auspices).

Coping behaviors and system-bucking. All three teachers had their own ways of dealing with loss of autonomy, micromanagement, district-mandated materials, or any other aspect of the work environment that is negatively affected as a result of these. Teachers had a variety of either coping or "system-bucking" methods that they had adopted. These ranged from changing schools entirely; to simply complying with administrator directives and trying to fit in activities of one's own choosing, such as Saeed's skits, in the limited time available; to contacting a publisher of the district-mandated textbook to suggest ways to improve it; to speaking out about what one perceived to be ineffective policies or methods; to completely refusing to use the district-mandated materials altogether.

Saeed got increasingly annoyed at the gradual loss of autonomy at her old school, and recently transferred to a new school (an Early College) that provided somewhat more teacher autonomy due to its unique structure. Saeed had always been willing to voice concerns about testing, micromanagement, and loss of autonomy (such as group planning, etc.) but also planned to conduct future research that might help to improve these widespread problems. Morton stated that he would like to move to another grade level where there was no state-mandated testing, after expressing his disapproval at the types of activities he was being forced to implement approximately 85% of his teaching time. In the meantime, he had talked with the online publisher to suggest ways to improve the mandated online textbook. Gwendolyn already "had enough," and recently submitted two job applications at other districts due to the stifling micromanagement at her current school. She began to implement Saeed's skits anyway, in rebellion against the stifling school climate and policies.

Background, personality, & teaching philosophy. There were many similarities to be found in teacher background (including childhood and adulthood experiences) as well as in personalities, teaching influences and stated philosophies, between or among teachers who utilized Saeed's skits in their history classrooms. Some characteristics were shared among all three teachers; others were shared between two teachers. Teacher background may or may not influence teacher willingness to implement arts-integrative activities such as Saeed's skits. Characteristics that were only mentioned by one teacher were not considered significant for the purposes of this study. Teacher background similarities are depicted in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Similar background characteristics between/among researcher and teacher participants

Teacher background characteristic (childhood/adulthood experience, personality, influences on teaching style, teaching philosophy)	Three teachers share	Two teachers share
Reported having overcome challenges; displayed perseverance in educational attainment	X	
Voiced desire for autonomy as teachers	X	
Voiced respect for student individuality & choice	X	
Described content knowledge of history as a significant aspect of either upbringing or education	X	
Reported having supportive parents	X	
Attended alternative certification program to become a teacher	X	
Reported history of feeling different or unique	X	
Stated having a peace-loving personality	X	
Stated belief in the importance of fun, creativity, risk-taking, and flexibility	X	
Reported living in poverty at some point during childhood or adulthood		X
Identified as gifted/talented early in educational career, and thrived in classes that allowed student individuality and choice		X
Reported having performing arts background (either as a performer or through collaboration with one)		X
Reported being a single parent at some point		X
Specifically listed their fathers as having profound effect upon love of history, personality (including sense of humor), and teaching style		X
Specifically listed their mothers as having fostered tolerance/non-discriminatory worldview		X
Background characteristics in common	9	6

Sources: researcher's self-narrative & participant narratives.

Significance of teacher mentoring in shaping teaching personalities. All three teachers mentioned stories about teacher mentoring, albeit in different ways. All three

stories somehow linked the core subject of history to theater arts or the use of arts-integrative activities in the classroom. Two teachers had profound interdisciplinary collaboration experiences with theater arts teachers; one of these teachers was later appointed to be the mentor of a first-year theater arts teacher. Both of these experiences resulted in meaningful history-theater arts collaboration on an ongoing basis. Another teacher observed a new teacher at her school who had been negatively influenced by his content-area mentors (not official mentors), to stick to the district-mandated materials. That new teacher soon displayed behaviors similar to the influencing teachers, which was characterized by conformity and reluctance to collaborate.

Summary. This research utilized a four-step narrative inquiry design. Narrative self-inquiry was used to relay the story of the researcher, while narrative methods of storying and restorying participant thoughts shared in interviews (original and follow-up) were used to gather information from two teacher participants related to the research question. Finally, a focus group interview with the researcher and teacher participants was undertaken to serve to explore, to clarify, confirm/refute, compare/contrast, and generate new ideas. The researcher used audio recordings of these interviews to generate transcripts, from which stories/narratives were created for the teacher participants. Data analysis consisted of the simple coding method by Miles and Huberman (1994). The researcher pored through the transcripts a minimum of three times, each time adding sub-codes, combining codes, creating all new coding categories, or in some cases deleting categories based on information (or lack thereof) found in the data. The researcher maintained an electronic data analysis table by which the perceptions of all three teachers on various categories could be compared at a glance. This table greatly facilitated the

generation of themes.

Data analysis revealed the manifest themes, which emanate from the research question: that all three teachers (the researcher and both teacher participants) ranked skits, a progressive-type learning activity, as more effective in promoting social justice (student engagement and sense of community) in their history classrooms than other types of progressive/student-centered activities or traditional-type learning strategies. In addition, several latent themes emerged during the data analysis which warranted further consideration, which all teachers reported having influence on their ability to implement Saeed's skits or other activities of their own choosing: overemphasis on testing and testing-related activities; micromanagement and district-mandated activities; coping behaviors and system-bucking; similarities in teacher background (childhood/adulthood experiences); teacher personality, and teaching philosophy; and the significance of teacher mentoring.

Chapter V

"Facts and skills do matter, but only in a context and for a purpose." –Alfie Kohn

Discussion

The need for a social justice-fostering environment in public school American history classrooms is the central feature of this narrative inquiry. Research has shown that the implementation of progressive and arts-integrative strategies such as Saeed's skits can make a meaningful difference in the social justice components of student engagement and sense of community. The challenge that inspired this study was that a variety of obstacles often stand in the way of teacher autonomy and choice in the classroom. It is important that history teachers persist in seeking strategies for the classroom that promote social justice—even in the face of these realities. One place to start is for teachers to remain mindful to purposely choose instructional techniques, such as Saeed's skits, that target as many students as possible. Cole (2008) noted that good instruction means choosing strategies that are "engaging, relevant, multicultural, and appealing to a variety of modalities and learning styles" (para. 1). This conclusion was underscored by the works of Lorimer (2009), McFadden (2012), Burstein & Knotts (2010), Ruppert (2006), Smith (2009), Graves (2008), Colley (2012), Nolan (2007), Donahue & Stewart (2010), Reif & Grant (2009), and Great Schools Partnership (2017).

The theoretical framework of this study was the progressive education model (Dewey, 1897; Kohn, 2008). Within this framework, a premium is placed on the quality of learning rather than on the number of items learned. There is also a belief that all subjects overlap and that students should be facilitated in making connections among them all. In addition, because all humans are different, it is understood that all students

will not fit into one box. Therefore, beliefs in individualized learning and student choice would represent a progressive worldview. Lastly, critical thinking, community, collaboration, tolerance, and inclusion are all fostered. Significantly, the arts, which include Saeed's skits, are highly valued under the progressive education model.

As the author of "Saeed's skits," I have seen firsthand that they can transform a classroom into a place where students want to be, and my personal experience is included in this study in the form of personal narratives. In an effort to corroborate my experience, two teachers who have also implemented Saeed's content-rich, humorous skits in their own American history classrooms were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and to augment an ever-growing body of evidence regarding the efficacy of arts-integrative activities. The qualitative research design included autobiographical self-inquiry, storying and restorying, and a focus group session. A simple and flexible coding method inspired by Miles and Huberman was utilized to analyze the transcribed interview data. Teacher participants were involved in each step of the data analysis process to increase the trustworthiness of the results.

It is my hope that the vast body of scientific research supporting arts integration (such as Saeed's skits), soon to include this study, will be given more credence by politicians when making decisions for public school students in the future (Fiske, 1999; Kohn, 2008; Silverstein & Layne, 2010; Ruppert, 2006; Smith, 2009; Appel, 2006).

It would give me a great sense of satisfaction to know that, through my research, those who hold so much power over the lives of public school students (such as teachers, administrators, and superintendents) can gain more awareness about the power held by activities like Saeed's skits in promoting social justice, including student engagement and

sense of community in American History classrooms.

Interpretation of Findings

The focus of this research was to explore the perspectives of the researcher and two additional history educators who also have experience incorporating Saeed's skits in their classrooms as an integral learning strategy that would foster the social justice elements of student engagement and sense of community.

Research Question.

The driving question in this research was as follows:

> What are teacher perceptions of Saeed's skits in terms of social justice themes (progressive in nature [i.e., non-traditional], and fostering student engagement and sense of community)?

Based upon the themes that emerged from the data analysis of the researcher's narrative self-inquiry as well as the transcribed participant interviews, this research question was answered.

Theme One: Teacher Perceptions on Progressive/Arts-integrative Activities vs. Student-centered or Traditional.

Teachers reported significant experience having implemented all sorts of activities in their history classrooms, including progressive/arts integration, progressive/student-centered, and traditional, over an extended period. However, when it came to which type of learning activity teachers felt promoted the most student engagement and sense of community, all three teachers expressed a definite preference for various arts-integrative activities, including Saeed's skits. All three teachers also indicated beliefs in utilizing a wide array of student choice activities to elicit student

interest. Teachers offered their assessments on which types of activities had more positive effects upon their classroom learning environments. All teachers felt that Saeed's skits, which fall under the category of progressive/arts-integrative teaching and learning strategies, were superior to progressive/student-centered and/or traditional strategies. The perceptions of teachers in this study would be supported by past research highlighting the effectiveness of arts integration strategies such as Saeed's skits. These studies include Fiske (1999), Kohn (2008), Silverstein and Layne (2010), Ruppert (2006), Smith (2009), and Appel (2006).

Teacher background. Teacher background may influence teacher willingness to implement arts-integrative activities such as Saeed's skits. There were several characteristics that all three teachers had in common (see Table 4.1). All three teachers shared the quality of perseverance, having overcome significant challenges in their lives, including living in poverty, being single mothers, and continuing to strive for higher education through it all. Next, all three teachers voiced feelings of uniqueness, weirdness, or singularity. These qualities may be related to their desire for autonomy, understanding of and respect for student choice, willingness to engage in flexibility/risk-taking, and comfort level displayed towards fun/creative environments in their classrooms. The references to being "weird" were intriguing, and may be profound, as "strangeness" or "making the past strange" (including the weaving of fictional elements into the teaching and learning of history to generate student interest) are factors that, via arts integration such as Saeed's skits, may foster increased student engagement and sense of community according to Freeman and Levstik (1988), VanSledright (2008), Berk (2002), and Anderson (2011). This may be an argument for the worth of surprising,

unique teaching and learning strategies, activities that implement fictional elements, and focusing on the oddities of historical figures to capture student interest and make learning memorable, . . . all of which are attributes of Saeed's skits.

Lastly, all three teachers reported having supportive parents, peace-loving personalities, content knowledge of history (either via education or upbringing), and a history of attending alternative certification programs to become teachers. Overall, teacher background data yielded interesting patterns which could be used as inspiration for further study about which teacher background characteristics are more likely to be correlated with a comfort level in using arts integration strategies such as Saeed's skits.

Theme Two: Teacher Perceptions on the Impact of Saeed's Skits on Social Justice (Student Engagement and Sense of Community)

The researcher and both teacher participants reported their perceptions that Saeed's skits dynamically impacted the social justice environment in their classrooms in terms of student engagement and sense of community.

Student engagement. Teachers shared perceptions on the impact Saeed's skits had on student engagement in their classrooms. Firstly, students in all three classrooms displayed remarkably similar behaviors during and post-skit. These behaviors included making comments indicating that they wanted to do the skit again, to return later in the day to experience the skit again, to try out other character roles within the skit, to remain in history class all day, or to watch another class do the skit. In addition, teachers reported that their students would often take their excitement and share it with others outside of the history classroom, such as other teachers and administrators. One teacher even overheard her students excitedly sharing their skit experience with peers in the

hallway between classes. Lastly, students often asked to revisit specific skits later, either for enjoyment or to help them remember information about a particular topic.

Teacher perceptions agreed with past research on arts integration (including skits) and student engagement, such as Robinson (2013), McFadden (2012), Baker (2013), Brock (2011), Tollafield (2011), Lorimer (2009), Burstein and Knotts (2010); and Williamson and Zimmerman (2009). Teachers cited various reasons for their conclusions. For example, teachers were not only able to propagate interest from all students in their classrooms, but their students displayed increased attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion.

With regard to content retention, memory, and comprehension as signs of student engagement, teachers elucidated once again that Saeed's skits were appreciably beneficial to them in creating a social justice-oriented classroom. Teachers reported that students exhibited more depth of knowledge, recognized concepts discussed within the skits during later exams and quizzes, grasped information related to the topic (but not in the skit) with more ease, wrote accurately about key concepts, and remembered information longer. The advantageous effect Saeed's skits had upon content retention caused positive after-effects, as students took that content knowledge into classroom application activities post-skit. These findings would agree with the studies of Deasy (2002), Graves (2008), Eisner, (1998), Colley (2012), Podlozny (2000), Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskava, and Hardiman (2011), Clapper (2010), Walker, Tabone, and Weltsek (2011), and Catterall (2002).

Further, there were indications post-skit that suggested students' positive visions of the future with regard to their history classrooms. For example, students made

comments indicating curiosity regarding what events they were learning in history class might mean for the future. In addition, years later, students contacted teachers to make comments signifying their disappointment that their high school teachers had not used Saeed's skits, and offering their belief that it would have helped them learn history better in high school. Next, students presented a desire to be physically present in the history classroom, commenting that they wanted to stay "all day." Lastly, after experiencing Saeed's skits, students requested to continue doing them all year long. Once again, this evidence mirrors findings in the past research of Robinson & Schur (2010), Eynde and Turner (2006), Catterall (2002), Baker (2013), Brock (2011), Graves (2008), Colley (2012), Podlozny (2000), Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskava, and Hardiman (2011), Clapper (2010), and Walker, Tabone, and Weltsek (2011). These findings indicated a need for a shift in thinking about what types of activities truly ought to be "district-mandated." There is a substantial amount of research supporting the efficacy of progressive/arts integration as teaching and learning activities. If school districts want to enact policies that are research-based, it may be prudent for education researchers to refresh their memories about what research, including this study, says regarding what constitutes engaging and community-building activities.

Sense of community. Teachers shared perceptions on the impact Saeed's skits had on student engagement in their classrooms. Teachers reported that various aspects of sense of community were positively affected as a result of implementing Saeed's skits.

All three teachers shared different examples which indicated students feeling more of a sense of belonging and safety in the history classroom. For instance, teachers mentioned that when doing skits, all students could be a part of the activity. Also,

students who had not expressed a desire to participate before became interested in doing so. One occasion was illustrated of students suddenly seeming to realize that they had value to the educational process that was happening in the history classroom. Students were able to inject aspects of their own personalities into the activity, rather than having to conform. Student-teacher relationships were strengthened, and students sometimes became willing to share more about themselves post-skit. This confirms the past findings of Colley (2012), Werner (2002), Pecaski McLennan (2008), Klein (2010), and Reif and Grant (2010). These findings suggest that students "owned" or demonstrated a sense of belonging in these skits, because they willingly injected themselves and their personalities into them. In addition, they became more open to sharing aspects of their lives with others, denoting a sense of safety. The skits seemed to give all students in the classroom a reason to feel like contributing members of the classroom community. This also fell in line with all teacher participants' personal definitions of social justice.

Inclusion and differentiation became seamless with Saeed's skits, according to teachers. All three teachers reported that every student in their classroom had access to the content and meaningfully participated in the skits in some way. Due to the significant bolstering of content understanding, every student in the classroom had something to offer in discussions. Various learning styles or multiple intelligences were all satisfied by the array of jobs that could be assigned related to a Saeed's skit. No matter whether students were struggling learners or gifted and talented, there were appropriate parts for them to be had in a Saeed's skit. Even students who had never shown a desire to participate in class were suddenly willing to do so. English language learners displayed happiness at being able to participate in class and to have the opportunity to learn history

content due to the accessible nature of the language in the skits. In addition, skits allowed teachers to assign individualized assignments both during and post-skit based on student choice. These experiences relayed by teachers in this study were similar to the findings of Colley (2012), Lorimer (2011), Donahue and Stuart (2010), Nolan (2007), Robinson (2013), Dwyer (2011), Rabkin and Redmond (2005), Ingram and Seashore (2005), Mason, Steedly, and Thurman (2005), Klein (2010), Nolan and Patterson (2000), Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010), and Smutny (2002). Given the increasingly globalized world and accompanying challenges that school districts face with regard to reaching all learners and student sub-populations, the amount of research demonstrating the power of arts integration should attract the attention of educational leaders who want to foster meaningful student learning in their schools.

All teachers provided examples of how multiple perspectives and points of view were easily illuminated in Saeed's skits. Saeed talked about her students' imaginations being sparked regarding what historical figures might have thought or done behind the scenes. Complicated topics involving conflict and war were made easier to understand because students could visualize the viewpoints, reasoning, and motivations of players on both sides. Gwendolyn explained that Saeed's skits helped make the historical figures seem like living people, rather than just names on paper. Students also began to realize that historical figures of the past were not much different than they are and that they had similar wants, needs, and motivations. These experiences give credence to past studies, such as Freeman and Levstik (1988), Deasy (2002), Catterall (2002), Anderson (2011), Kincheloe (2005), Eynde and Turner (2006), and VanSledright (2008). As Vygotsky (1978) showed in his Zone of Proximal Development Theory, many students in our

classrooms may not have had the background experiences with which to decipher what they are learning or seeing; therefore, they need to be explicitly shown the context and relevance in engaging ways; Saeed's skits accomplish this.

Teachers gave evidence that students' interpersonal skills, collaboration, and/or teamwork were increased by engaging in Saeed's skits. Saeed gave an example of a student comment which expressly indicated that Saeed's skits increased his/her learning because they allowed interaction. Gwendolyn described students who had typically been somewhat introverted "come out of their shells" and gradually took on larger parts in Saeed's skits. Morton shared his experience that his students were given the opportunity through Saeed's skits to engage with peers in appropriate ways that still managed to be fun for students. This reiterates the results of Klein (2010), Nolan and Patterson (2000), Newmann (1992), Riggs and Gholar (2009), Schreck (2011), Smith (2009), and Anderson (2011). These experiences may indicate that teachers need to purposely implement unique learning activities in the classroom if they hope to spark a sense of engagement and community in the classroom, and that traditional activities like textbooks may not encourage such an environment. This raises questions for teachers in terms of how to figure out ways to continue following district mandates (in cases where online textbooks are required) and to also attempt to foster social justice in their history classrooms. It is a conundrum that needs further thought, consideration, and social action.

All teachers furnished evidence of both social consciousness and cultural awareness being nourished by Saeed's skits. For example, in Saeed's classroom, a student displayed increased social consciousness after a Saeed's skit about issues of

differences in socioeconomic class. Gwendolyn gave an example of Saeed's skits having increased students' understanding of the plight of people in the past and the humanity they share in common, such as mistreatment of women, children, and immigrants in the textile mills. Students were also able to visualize the need for continued social action to prevent abuses like those from happening again. Morton noted the belief that students probably are already conscious of social issues that have occurred past and present, but that Saeed's skits gave them a venue in which to express their thoughts and feelings about those issues. Again, these findings confirm the studies of Reif and Grant (2010), Klein (2010), Burstein and Knotts (2010), and Catterall (2002).

Many of our schools have diverse student bodies, and many students do not come to school with the background knowledge necessary for textbook passages to be meaningful or to spark imagination or interest, as exemplified in studies demonstrating their ineffectiveness (Kincheloe, 2005; Loewen, 2007, 2016; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Students often ask, "Why do we even need history class?" It is a question that I often answer with something like, "Because in order to make the world better, you need to be aware of what happened in the past." Students need to be conscious of the motivations and points of view of people in the past in order to predict how the same thing might happen again, but in a new time, a new place, with different people. As the great Carl Sagan once said, "You have to know the past to understand the present…we can understand ourselves much better by understanding other cases" (Mandelo, 2012, para. 13).

Teachers described how relevance and real-world connections were solidified because of Saeed's skits. Once again, students found commonalities between themselves

and Irish immigrants in the 1830s textile mills, and generated similarities to what some of their parents, also immigrants, may have experienced today. Morton noted that many of our students still deal with issues covered in Saeed's skits. For example, through the Saeed's skit *Pullin' the Strings,* students observed a late-1700s example of migrants' movements being controlled by those in power. Gwendolyn described the deep conversation she had with an African American student after *Real Texas Talk Show*, in which he indicated being "grateful for the change" between then and now. After the Saeed's skit *Temperance Throwdown*, several students in Saeed's class willingly shared challenges they faced in their own homes because of a parent's alcoholism. Further, Saeed shared personal experiences with them as well, leading to a bonding experience with students in addition to the meaningful real-world connections being made.

This research suggests that Saeed's description of her skits as helping get to know historical figures "as if they were alive" may hold special importance with regards to real-world connections and the substantive difference between textbooks and skits, because students are able to virtually connect with historical figures via the human students playing character roles. Teachers' reports of increased ability of students to understand real-world relevance underscores the research of Freeman and Levstik (1988), Anderson (2011), Catterall (2002), Gullatt (2007), Burstein and Knotts (2010), Kincheloe (2005), Eynde and Turner (2006), and VanSledright (2008). The research also highlights the notion that students need exposure to the plight of others in the past. Seeing scenes from the past play out before them may help them to make connections and understand the humanity they have in common. We cannot just assume that because we can make these connections that students are able to do so. I once heard a colleague say that he had

taken students on a field trip to downtown Houston, and thought that the students would think it was "lame." He stated that he was flabbergasted to learn that many of his students, lifelong Houstonians, had never visited downtown Houston. We must help students have these experiences, and, similarly, in history classes we must help them understand past experiences by figuratively "putting them in the action."

All teachers reported their feelings that inter- and intradisciplinary collaboration was fostered by Saeed's skits, although they experienced varying levels of success in seeing the actual collaboration come to fruition. Saeed described an experience of a very positive, teamwork-oriented, flexible environment with content-area colleagues in which Saeed's skits were often used in various ways to preview, teach, or review content, or simply for entertainment. Morton noted that teachers from other content areas had witnessed Saeed's skits going on in his classroom, and, after assuming that he had written them, had approached him to write skits for their classes. He commented that these teachers were very well-intentioned, and expressed his feeling that they had not taken the next step due to both their lack of experience in utilizing arts-integrative activities such as Saeed's skits as well as their need for training in how to implement these in their classrooms. Gwendolyn described that, while she did not see the fruition of the request, that a math teacher noticed Saeed's skits happening in her classroom and indicated interest in having similar activities for her own content area. However, the climate at the school appeared to prevent her further pursuance of this goal. Overall, by considering both the past collaboration experiences of teachers in this study as well as the interest shown by a few teachers who desired skits for their own classrooms, there are similarities to past studies conducted by Catterall, et al. (1999), Werner (2002), Williamson and

Zimmerman (2009), and Taylor (2008).

All teachers reported extremely positive personal experiences, emotions, and feelings when implementing Saeed's skits in their classrooms, which also contributed to a holistically positive and social justice-oriented classroom community. Saeed relayed that while implementing her skits, she had feelings of delight, and that the time seemed to fly so fast that before she knew it, the end of the day had arrived. Gwendolyn characterized her personal experience while implementing Saeed's skits in her classroom as one of pride, as she watched her students achieve a goal she had set, which was to witness students having a "passion for history." Morton related that he experienced "laughter," which he further explained as "joy at what was happening in his classroom," due to his assessment that his students were engaged, learning, and having fun while doing it. He also commented that during Saeed's skits, he was personally entertained due to the nature of the skits and the humorous elements contained within them. Groth and Alpert (1997) also found evidence that the classroom teacher's experience was greatly improved through arts integration such as Saeed's skits.

Latent themes. Several latent themes emerged from the data analysis. Only latent themes which may have adverse effects upon teacher ability to implement activities of their own choosing, including Saeed's skits, are included in this discussion.

Testing. Data analysis showed that testing and testing-related activities were pervasive and had significant effects on teachers' ability to professionally do their jobs as they saw fit. Testing issues arose so often in the data analysis that a new coding category had to be created in which to make note of these issues. Teachers described that state standardized tests, district-mandated benchmark and "snapshot"/unit tests, test reviews,

data meetings, and other test-related activities consumed a significant amount of the time that they could be planning or implementing activities of their own choosing. Teachers described an environment in which students had no time to reflect or review because they were already preparing for the next district-mandated test.

Serious issues with the quality of the district exams was an especially huge concern, as the data from these tests was used to judge students, teachers, administrators, schools, and/or districts. Teachers expressed their disdain for being mandated to attend data meetings to discuss data that they felt was scientifically neither valid nor reliable. Because of this, teachers did not feel that district benchmark scores were necessarily indicative of how students would perform on a state test; in fact, they pointed out that the tests seemed to foster an unnecessary sense of competition and "zero-sum" worldview within the schools, and perhaps even was a cause of diminished interdisciplinary collaboration. The design of the benchmark tests was called into question as well, with teachers pointing to either poor quality of questions, test question format, or ill-conceived choices with regard to which questions were selected for each exam. Morton noted that if teachers did not have to worry about mandated items such as tests, he "could have the freedom to allow students to focus on things they were interested in," including Saeed's skits.

Unfairness in relation to district-mandated tests was also voiced by teachers. They indicated feeling that because some teachers saw the test beforehand and others do not, that the testing conditions would not be conducive to valid data. Further, some of the teachers who were privy to the exam beforehand possibly helped their students review for the test in ways that other teachers could not, or share information about the test with

their content-area friends at the school. In addition, Gwendolyn mentioned a situation in which some teachers planned to give an open-book unit exam, while others were not; administrators were not aware of this situation. She believed that the data from these tests would be "skewed." Lastly, Saeed noted that concerns about the tests often "fall on deaf ears" and that poor testing design and unequal testing conditions compromised any resulting data.

Teacher reports of overtesting and the related micromanagement and district control of curriculum parallel with past findings of White and Walker (2008), Craig (2009), Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, and Dean (2003), Fulton (2015), Ravitch (2014), and Smith (2014). Further wide-ranging concerns expressed by teachers surrounding testing was also seconded by a group of experts at the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) which noted a variety of problems with grading teachers and/or students based upon standardized testing data. Besides serious issues with the questionable statistical data resulting from these tests, many other consequences were reported, such as diminished collaboration among teachers, loss of autonomy, "demoralization," reliance upon mostly traditional teaching and learning activities, and more. In addition, because there are broad and immeasurable influences on any student's individual academic ability, one single teacher was found to have very little to do with a student's standardized testing scores for any given year (Baker, et al., 2010).

District-mandated materials and micromanagement. Teachers reported that they were increasingly directed to use district-mandated materials, such as an online textbook or subject curricula, or department-made group lesson plans, which severely limited their ability as professionals to implement more effective strategies of their own choosing,

such as Saeed's skits. This type of "constrained professionalism" is common in schools that institute standardized testing; teachers' ability to make their own curricular decisions are greatly impacted (Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Teachers were pressured to use the mandated textbooks in various ways, such as by being reminded how much money the district had spent on them, and by requiring teachers to maintain logs proving to administrators that their students had logged in to the online textbook daily. Morton remarked that "the number one requirement (determining activities we do in class) is actually district mandate." Gwendolyn shared that administrators constantly monitor that teachers were using the mandated materials, and frequently asked teachers directly whether they are using them. In her case, teachers were told to expect 10 walkthroughs a week.

Teachers expressed ire that if using the district-mandated activities as required, it would have disastrous effects upon their autonomy. Morton estimated having 15% or less of teaching time, after district-mandated activities and tests, in which to do activities of his own choosing. Gwendolyn stated that "if [she] were to use the activities that were mandated . . . [she] would have no time to bring in my own personality or my own ideas to enhance my student learning . . . no time . . . and that's why I balk at their activities." Concerns about district-mandated curricula, the shift towards forced conformity, the move away from more progressive student-centered and/or arts integration-type activities (such as Saeed's skits), and abundance of shallow, low-quality learning activities were also expressed by Louis, Febey, and Schroeder (2005), David and Greene (2007), Datnow and Castellano (2000), David (2008), Au (2007), Reif and Grant (2010); Baker, et al. (2010); Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, and Dean (2003). Another past study to

ponder in relation to the overuse of textbooks is that of Schug, Western, and Enochs (1997) who concluded that, among other findings, teachers who relied too heavily upon textbooks tended to have less content knowledge in their content area.

Teachers also voiced complaints about the nature of the district-mandated activities. Morton estimated that in the online textbook he was mandated to use, only one out of 12 activities would be considered "anything but traditional," and that "I could, if I were a student, go through the program without ever having to talk to another student." Gwendolyn described the departmental lessons they were made to use as repetitive and lacking elements of engagement or excitement for students. Gwendolyn had complained, "Every (district-mandated) lesson starts with a gallery walk. Every lesson . . . and sometimes the vocabulary is a gallery walk." She also expressed concern that all students did not have access to an online textbook from home. Teacher concerns about textbooks and/or the ineffective nature of traditional activities in general were also expressed in studies conducted by Loewen (2007, 2016), Sewall (1988), Foster and Padgett (1999), Kincheloe (2005), NPR (2014), Joffe (2015), Marcotte (2014), Zinth (2012), Schug, Western, and Enochs (1997).

Additionally, teachers were very concerned about increasing levels of micromanagement, from numerous required data meetings, to "forced group planning," to attempts to coerce teachers to do the same activities, to forced book studies, and more. Past research underscoring increasing levels of micromanagement and emphasis on conformity include Craig (2009), David (2008), Au (2007), Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, and Dean (2003).

Teachers seemed to believe that the situation would get worse. One teacher

voiced significant concern about the proliferation of (and rumors surrounding) the passage of the Texas "District of Innovation" law and its subsequent adoption by many school districts. Many teachers viewed this initiative as simply another tactic to undermine teachers and remove whatever rights that they still have, and that it will even further intensify micromanagement and remove teacher ability to enact strategies such as Saeed's skits that foster social justice in the classroom. Coincidentally, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) shared the deep concerns expressed by Gwendolyn and other educators. The AFT was issuing "hazard warnings" to educators across the state regarding the District of Innovation initiative, stating that "one of the most hazardous pieces of legislation enacted by Texas lawmakers last year bears a harmless-sounding name" (AFT, 2016). They pointed out that this law resulted from a bill "with an Orwellian name" that was "snuck through (at the) last minute" of the last legislative session of 2015. They noted that school districts that adopted this initiative can basically "exempt themselves from many important safeguards of educational quality and employee, student, and parental rights in the Texas Education Code" (AFT, 2016 April 22). The specific codes in question were as follows:

- Education Code Chapter 21, covering "educator contracts, due process, and salary guarantees; teacher certification standards; appraisal rights; planning and preparation periods; duty-free lunch; disability leave" (AFT, 2016 April 22).
- Education Code Chapter 22, dealing with "employee immunity from liability, employee personal leave and assault leave; the right to voluntary payroll deduction of professional dues" (AFT, 2016 April 22).

- Education Code Chapter 37, which protects teacher rights to "remove disruptive students; the procedural rights of teachers and other school employees as well as students in discipline cases" (AFT, 2016 April 22).
- Education Code Chapters 25, 26, 28, which include various protections for teachers related to "class size limits," "teachers' grading authority," and "parental rights" (AFT, 2016 April 22).

The AFT warned teachers that the "name (of the new law) doesn't fit," and that it gives a "false name of innovation," asking, "Who can be against innovation, right?" (AFT, 2016 October 19, para. 2, 4). However, they described the reality that supporters of this new law used benign-sounding phrases such as "giving districts flexibility" which they characterized as "another buzzword at the Capitol--to sidestep certain sections of the state Education Code" (AFT, 2016 October 19, para. 3). This ability to "sidestep" the law was therefore at the heart of what District of Innovation was about. The AFT ominously declared, "All of this is very disturbing and far from innovative. The word innovation has been hijacked, since it should have been reserved for what's really needed in public education" (AFT, 2016 October 19, para. 10). By surveying past research demonstrating the efficacy of arts integration to answer the question regarding "what's really needed in public education," it is suggested that the word "innovation" should certainly apply to activities that are effective in engaging students and building community, such as Saeed's skits have done.

School districts across the state that have declared themselves "Districts of Innovation" have adopted it in varying degrees, some adopting only a few of its provisions, while others are adopting many or most of them. District plans must be made

public and specific about chosen provisions. One district attempted to grab even more power than the law allows, by adopting all the provisions publicly stated plan and then declaring their desire to be able to "pick and choose" which provisions they needed "as they went along." They planned to allow these potential amendments to their original plan to pass with the two-thirds vote of their school board. Consequently, the AFT urged teachers to write to the Texas Education Commissioner to use his legal power of implementation to require districts to follow the law exactly as written (AFT, 2016 April 26).

Overall, the District of Innovation law appeared to be geared towards districts being able to exert significantly more control over teachers, students, and even parents. This fell in line with the research of Craig (2009) in which it was concluded that this type of strict administrative oversight within the educational arena seems to be increasing over time and results in teacher loss of autonomy. In effect, the classroom becomes a "disputed" arena, because there is tension between teachers' decision-making for their own classrooms and the relentless administrative pronouncements that stymie them. Teachers' ability to implement activities like Saeed's skits may soon be compromised even more.

Coping and system-balking behaviors. The creative teachers in this inquiry coped with over-testing, district mandated materials, micromanagement in various ways. Morton was very compliant, following district mandates without complaining; however, the teacher admitted sometimes "cutting (the online textbook) short in order to do what he wants in class instead." Morton adopted a conciliatory approach and had contacted the online textbook publisher in hopes that they might implement some of his

suggestions. He also utilized his ease with technology to adopt data-centered approaches in his classroom to placate administrators when they visited his classroom.

Gwendolyn refused to implement the online textbook in class all year long, choosing to give vague answers when asked about it. However, she indicated that she had not been able to implement Saeed's skits all year long due to the constant walkthroughs, adding that arts-integrative activities like those are "not what they want in the classroom." She stated that she had recently "had enough" and finally did a Saeed's skit in her classroom anyway. She reported that after seeing how exhilarated her students were in doing the skit, her concern about what administrators might think completely dissipated. She noted that she also copes with working conditions by "(learning) to talk their lingo; show them some data. That's all they want." Gwendolyn's conclusions regarding administrators "not wanting" skits or other unique activities, and their myopic focus on standardized testing data, were similar to results also reported by Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, and Dean (2003), RavitchBlog (2016), *21st Century Principal* (2015), and Steinbach (2013).

Saeed experienced issues like these in her previous school, which was a major reason for her move to an Early College High School. Because an ECHS is somewhat autonomous, work conditions like these are greatly diminished (TEA *ECHS Blueprint*, 2017). Saeed did not report feeling micromanaged at her current school, and felt a greater sense of professional support. In any case, for Saeed, remaining a classroom teacher was the preferred way to continue effecting change, especially by implementing her skits and continuing to share them with colleagues. All three teachers in this study displayed an immense love for their jobs, but to varying degrees had had to act in ways that went

against their professional judgment in order to remain in compliance with district mandates.

Effects of mentoring. Teacher mentoring may have significant effects on a new teacher's feelings on interdisciplinary collaboration and/or arts integration such as Saeed's skits. Saeed described a partnership early in her teaching career with the theater arts teacher at her school. This interdisciplinary partnership had significant positive effects upon the possibilities that Saeed could see for the future in terms of teaching and learning. Because of Saeed's experience as a history teacher that worked closely with theater arts to maximize student learning, she was later appointed by a principal to be the new teacher mentor of a first-year theater arts teacher. That new theater arts teacher later collaborated with the history department on fun learning activities for the students. Morton felt that his first-year teacher mentor, also a theater arts instructor, was the "number one influence" on him as a teacher. The strategies he was inspired to implement in his classroom were largely shaped by the meaningful collaboration he enjoyed with her.

Likewise, a mentor, whether official or unofficial, may also have the power to influence new teachers to be more insular, as an example from Gwendolyn illustrated. She related the story of a teacher in her department who was "taken under the wing" of other teachers, and later displayed non-collaborative behaviors when approached. While this teacher's behavior may have been caused by something completely unrelated, based upon the experiences shared by all three teachers, the potential impact of teacher mentoring is definitely something to ponder further.

Recommendations and Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice

This study adds to a scientific body of knowledge indicating that the extreme progressive instructional approach of arts integration, such as Saeed's skits, are beneficial for student learning. It focused on the aspects of student engagement and sense of community to promote social justice in American history classrooms. Teacher participant interviews demonstrated a common experience with the researcher in that both aspects of social justice were increased in their classrooms after they implemented skits as a learning tool. Previously, both teacher participants had used both traditional and other types of progressive/student-centered activities in their classrooms. All teachers in this study expressed their perceptions that when given a choice, they felt that arts integrative activities such as Saeed's skits were preferable to any other type of activity in promoting social justice (student engagement and sense of community). Unfortunately, it may not be so easy for teachers to adopt effective strategies such as Saeed's skits into their history classrooms, even given the massive amount of evidence for their effectiveness. Studies that have argued for the effectiveness or arts integration such as Saeed's skits are Kent and Sampson (2008), Brock (2011), Tollafield (2011), Pecaski McLennan (2008), Catterall (2002), Clapper (2010), Podlozny (2000), and others.

Education is headed in the wrong direction. Curricula are narrowing to make room for more tests, and micromanagement is getting worse and worse, having deleterious effects upon teacher autonomy (David, 2011; Walker, 2012; Craig, 2009). Teachers are being told to use, almost exclusively, a traditional learning strategy—albeit online—that probably will not engage most learners. Teachers feel pressured not to stray

from the curriculum calendar or its prescribed activities, as found in the past studies of David (2008), Au (2007), Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg, and Dean (2003), Kohn (1999), Wills and Sandholtz (2009). The incessant testing is having dreadful effects on public school environments, including lack of student engagement and sense of community, the hampering of interdisciplinary collaboration, an unnecessarily competitive work environment among teachers, unfairness and/or cheating, employee dissatisfaction, and more Detels (1999), Sloan (2009), Olwell and Raphael (2006), Tanner, (2016), Ravitch (2014), North (2016), Baker, et al. (2010).

It might even be argued that teachers are being separated from the fruits of their labor and/or are being subjected to an "assembly line mentality" of teaching, since so much emphasis and importance is being placed on standardized test scores and not teachers' own grading/evaluation of students and their work, in addition to having a significant amount of their own curricular choice removed. In sociology, there is a concept of anomie, in which one feels a sense of alienation from one's society because of rapidly changing norms. Surely teachers can feel a similar sense of alienation within their own profession, especially when they disagree with many decisions that they are forced to implement. Gavrielides and Artinopoulou (2013) state that

> the fragmentation of social identity, as well as the rejection of self-regulatory values, can result in a state of anomie…the degree of anomie is indicated by the extent to which there is a lack of consensus on norms judged to be legitimate. (p. 298)

Teachers who participated in this study discussed the various ways that they cope and/or buck the system. However, these behaviors are probably not very effective in

getting to the root of the problem. With every passing year, it seems that there are more tests, more mandates, and more micromanagement (Craig, 2009). Districts are touting new strategies that have progressive-sounding names, but provisions that are anything but progressive (AFT, 2016). State tests have not been reviewed by a third party for scientific validity and reliability as required by Texas state law, and yet students, teachers, administrators, schools, and even districts are judged on the data from those tests (TX House Research Organization, 2015). We hear what seems like good news, that districts must cut the number of benchmarks in half (to two full-length practice tests per year), but districts soon respond by more than doubling the number of tests, shortening them, and adapting by changing the names of some of these exams to "unit tests" or "snapshots." Furthermore, students now take more of these tests, much more often (Smith 2014). There must be a better way to assess student learning. Carol Burris, Executive Director of the Network for Public Education, indicates her belief that the International Baccalaureate Program may hold potential to be a much-improved option for schools who desire effective "curriculum and assessments" (as cited in Glatter, DeRuy, & Wong, 2016).

Conformity is being elicited from teachers more and more, via group planning, expectations of adhering to mandated materials, curricula, & activities, constant meetings, and more…which all have the effect of removing creativity and individuality. After all the mandates, there is no time for teachers to create their own lessons or institute learning activities that would be effective and meaningful, such as Saeed's skits. Teachers, some of whom have doctoral and master's degrees and are experts in their content areas, are relegated to being treated like people that cannot be trusted.

Teacher participant, Gwendolyn, decried the seemingly increasing obsession with electronic devices in the classroom, and relayed her perception that administrators seem to believe that students occupied on these devices constitutes student engagement. Carol Burris (Executive Director of the Network for Public Education) agrees, stating, "We do students a disservice when we follow fads—students will learn technological skills on their own. What remains invaluable is a sound academic education that develops well-rounded, informed citizens of the nation and the world" (as cited in Glatter, DeRuy, & Wong, 2016, para. 8). Rita Pin Ahrens (of the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center) notes that students do need technology readiness, but that "we have to think more creatively about how we present concepts, content, and opportunities to really expand students' ways of thinking . . . we need to organize and disrupt how we are currently teaching" (para. 3).

As participant Morton noted, "Garbage rolls downhill." Therefore, politicians, the vast majority of whom are not educators, often make ill-conceived decisions, and educators wind up paying the price. We must find ways to make politicians understand what is at stake: our children…our freedom…our democracy… ourselves . . . and even the planet. The drudgery of testing, conformity, and micromanagement is not going to create the leaders of tomorrow. We should be fostering environments that help children enjoy school and discover passion for learning. In order to meet that end, teachers must be allowed to be treated as professionals, and have autonomy in their classrooms to implement learning activities of their own choosing, such as Saeed's skits.

The researcher and both teacher participants in this study complained about constant micromanagement and pressure to conform to district lesson plans and pacing

calendars. Glatter, DeRuy, & Wong (2016) quoted several well-known experts in the field of education, who all describe an ideal educational world that is delightfully different: Catherine Cushinberry (Executive Director of Parents for Public Schools) agrees that teachers should retain more control within their own classrooms. She states that, ideally,

> teachers will play a major role in helping to organize the day. They know students best. Traditional subjects will have to be taught within context and with unconventional methods, such as the use of music, songwriting, raps, visual art, and trips outside of the classroom that will enrich the learning experience. (para. 11)

Michael Horn (co-founder of the Clayton Christensen Institute) asserts that "exposure to music and arts" is part of what is "critical to building a foundation for students with an eye toward helping them have a broad enough base such that they can find and develop passions and be engaged citizens" (para. 12). Carol Burris (Executive Director of the Network for Public Education) feels that the arts should be mandatory through the middle-school years (para. 9). Nicholson Baker (author of *Substitute: Going to School with a Thousand Kids)* recommended that "all reformers and armchair rigorists" who continually clamor to debate the "design of the core curricula" should "do some actual public-school teaching—maybe three weeks as a substitute every year—as a precondition to furthering their proposed changes" (para. 4) Baker further encourages teachers to use unorthodox methods in order to reach struggling learners, such as "…whatever holds their interest, and delights them, and makes them laugh" (para. 6). Randi Weingarten (President of the American Federation of Teachers), passionately shared her own

experience: "As a student, the humanities rocked my world—history, plays, literature" (para. 17). She went on to hint at the power of the arts to build community, commenting that "the arts and other strategies can "address (students') well-being, both physically and emotionally" and that this may be essential to ensuring that "kids are learning to love learning, not merely (reciting) facts. That requires giving them space to explore, play, and find out about themselves and each other" (para. 19).

Suggestions for Social Action

A well-known theory by sociologist Robert Michels (1876-1936) may be applicable to what is occurring in the sphere of education, and even carries with it specific suggestions for social action: Iron Law of Oligarchy (Michels, 1915). Michels's famous theory states that "power in organizations invariably becomes concentrated in the hands of a few people who use it to further their own self-interests" (Semones, 2010, p. 244). In large, complex organizations such as school districts, there may be a façade of democracy which allows the "rank and file" members (teachers and other staff) to occasionally vote on certain issues. However, according to Michels, those at the top of the hierarchical power structure would almost always act in ways that would maintain their own power. Moreover, those within the rank-and-file who happen to move up into the top echelon of the organization would soon develop views that would conform to those already occupying it.

These few people at the top appear to care very little about the desires or concerns of those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Those in power have control only give the "illusion of inclusion," and have total control over the dissemination of information related to the organization, which allowed them to craft this information in ways that best

"furthered their own interests" (Semones, 2010, p. 244). In addition, the lower-level members (such as, in this case, teachers) tend to be "apathetic regarding active participation" and have a "general lack of education and sophistication, part-time involvement because of other life priorities, and (a) tendency to blindly trust and respect those in authority…Michels called (this) the 'incompetency of the masses'" (Semones, 2010, p. 244). Michels had a very pessimistic view of large organizations, such as school districts, stating that basically there was no way to avoid this scenario—if there is a large organization, power will eventually become concentrated in the hands of a small number of people who will tend against acting in the best interests of the regular workers (Semones, 2010).

Therefore, what inspirations for social action can we possibly take from Michels' analysis of large organizations? He believed that for regular workers to have any hope of changing their situations for the better—in this case, teachers attempting to put a stop to the overtesting and micromanagement—they would have to be willing to do two specific things. Firstly, they had to embark upon a mission of "independent assessment and commitment to what is best for the organization." Secondly, they needed to be willing to try to "have their voices heard," which would mean that workers would have to take the initiative to accomplish several prerequisites: "attend meetings, gain some control over setting agendas, research important issues…" (Semones, 2010, p. 244).

Teachers such as the researcher and both participants in this study exemplify many of the qualities that Michels claims are necessary to effect change in a large organization. They have independently assessed the conditions in education and have come to their conclusions about how to make positive change. They have researched

important issues, and to varying degrees have made their voices heard. Up until now, however, their input may not have been very effective, because it was limited to individualized coping behaviors within their own classrooms. However, that will soon change, as all three teachers' voices will certainly be heard through the dissemination of this research. But what about other teachers who may share their views? Keeping the lessons of Robert Michel's Iron Law of Oligarchy in mind, how can these teachers best stand up for themselves through social action? Many teachers who are not satisfied with the status quo may be afraid to speak out for fear of retribution or ramifications, which, of course, are controlled by those in power positions who might wish to quell dissent.

Social action is an absolute must. Teachers who believe in arts integration such as Saeed's skits, and desire to see changes in the current educational climate of overtesting and micromanagement, must make their voices heard by taking part in one of the following: political participation (such as protesting the status quo of overtesting, becoming well-versed in policies that might affect them in the workplace, staying apprised of current events that affect the field of education); vocally supporting the arts (such as speaking out in support of the arts, staying apprised of research supporting the performing arts in the classroom, volunteering with local arts organizations). Teachers need to respectfully speak up when they hear others who are misinformed on the issues. By being familiar with teacher union newsletters, newspapers, online public education advocate websites, etc., teachers will have a better idea of who to contact. In some cases, "speaking up" may begin with the sharing of research like this study with other education professionals, including but not limited to teachers, administrators, school board members, state board members, and politicians who have influence over education

policy. The consequences of not engaging in social action are the continuation of overtesting and micromanagement, which remove the ability of teachers to run their classrooms how they see fit.

With regard to the new District of Innovation law and number of school districts that are jumping on the bandwagon, teachers might try to maximize their social action impact by focusing their attention and efforts first on neutralizing this law. Based on evidence, it appears that Gwendolyn and others are justified in their fears about districts increasing their use of control tactics, not only on teachers, but on students (and even parents). Teachers who share concerns about district testing, micromanagement, and mandated materials, and/or how the new District of Innovation law might even further impact their rights as professionals (such as the ability to use effective teaching strategies in their own classrooms, such as Saeed's skits) might follow the advice of AFT and contact the Texas Education Commissioner with their comments and suggestions (AFT, 2016, April 26).

Teacher participant Morton commented that he was very aware that the micromanagement, district-mandated materials, and loss of teacher autonomy probably resulted from the testing obsession; therefore, we might look at standardized testing as the root of many of these problems. Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment (TAMSA) has some resources on its website that teachers, parents, and others can use to make their voices heard (TAMSA, 2017). Furthermore, Texas House Bill 743, co-authored by Texas State Representative Dan Huberty, includes a provision requiring the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to

conduct a study on the required state curriculum known as the Texas Essential

> Knowledge and Skills (TEKS).The bill also would require TEA to audit and monitor performance by testing contractors…The bill would require all statewide standardized exams administered beginning with the 2015-16 school year to be, on the basis of empirical evidence, determined valid and reliable by an entity independent of TEA and any other entity that developed the assessment instrument.

Therefore, writing to the TEA to ensure that they are following through on this state law is another option for those who wish to take action. House Bill 743 would ensure, at the very least, that the state curricula and tests have been reviewed for scientific validity and reliability, and this is a good place to start (TX House Research Organization, 2017). If students are being prevented from taking part in activities that have been shown to foster engagement and community, then the activities that they are being made to do for such a significant amount of their time (such as tests and online textbooks) needs to be held to more scrutiny.

Teachers should also proactively prepare the next generation to be empowered, critical thinkers who can better fend off attempts to oppress them. Teachers might consider field trips for older students to teach younger students through the sharing of skit performances and discussion. Such activities may not only provide students with opportunities to learn, perform, and have fun, but also for them to interact with others in the community and build interpersonal and collaborative skills. Saeed's skits might also be used as a tool with which to interact with students in other states, even countries, by sharing videos they have recorded of their performances (such as what teacher participant Morton proposed) and discussing them in tools like Google Hangout. Morton's idea of

having students record their performances of Saeed's skits and creating a private YouTube channel that other students can access for learning and review purposes is very similar to an idea discussed by Dickinson. She stated, "In many schools, students equipped with video cameras videotape performances of their plays and broadcast them on in-house networks to other classes" (Dickinson, 1997). The possibilities are endless.

Change needs to start locally; therefore, teachers can make a difference by making efforts to use Saeed's skits or other arts integration strategies in their own classrooms, even in the face of district micromanagement. To succeed globally, large corporations must cater to local consumers (Citizens for Global Solutions, 2015), and we can apply that same logic to teaching. If we want our students to succeed in an increasingly globalized world, we need to focus on effecting change for our students first, in our very own classrooms. Besides allowing students to use Saeed's skits as-is, teachers might also encourage students to write their own skits. Teacher participants Gwendolyn and Morton, often spoke of allowing their students to create Saeed-style skits on history topics that they enjoyed.

As the author of Saeed's skits, I plan to continue writing and publishing skits and using them in my own classroom. As I am now teaching world history, I am starting a new collection of world history-themed Saeed's skits to add to my ever-growing American history collection. I also intend to think about attempting to write a few skits for other subject areas due to the interest expressed by other teachers, as revealed by my teacher participants.

In the spirit of sociologist Robert Michels, I will continue to express my professional opinion when I witness situations within my field that I know are

questionable, such as the new emphasis on textbooks (albeit online) and district adoptions of District of Innovation plans. I will continue to be politically active, and help contribute to educating friends, family, fellow teachers, and the community at large about trends in education that may impact their lives. Similarly, I will take some responsibility for tactfully and professionally educating friends and family about political issues that may affect the sphere of education. I will also request to see the research behind any new initiatives implemented by school districts and be prepared to challenge their use; as White (2015) notes, "questioning, investigating, and challenging" is essential in changing the status quo and fostering "equity and social justice." Importantly, I strongly encourage others to do the same.

Recommendations for Future Research

The experiences of teachers in this study were the inspiration for many of these recommendations for future research. Participants provided a plethora of issues that cry out for further study.

Morton and Gwendolyn both mentioned that they had utilized Saeed's skits as springboards for students writing their own skits. It would be fascinating to take a closer look at students who are tasked with authoring their own skits after participating in a Saeed's skit. Their work products could be analyzed for content (including humor, etc.), and their feelings about writing the skits could also be explored. In addition, Gwendolyn's experience of seeing possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration thwarted at her school deserves further study. Perhaps a research study might be able to narrow down the possible causes that would lead to such an environment.

All teachers shared positive experiences with Saeed's skits and ELL students.

The experiences of these ELL students as they participate in Saeed's skits, practice conversational English, and participate in class could be chronicled. The students could be followed as they move from class to class in order to assess which types of learning strategies they encounter seem to be yielding more engagement and sense of community. A participant observation-type study examining the quality of student discussion after a Saeed's skit might be very illuminating.

All teachers noted negative feelings towards overtesting. There are many avenues that could be explored related to the question "Do standardized tests accurately measure what (insert student group) have learned?" Future researchers might also seek to know how the constant standardized testing affects students' mindset and enjoyment about school. Teacher mindset and enjoyment of school is also a concern when it comes to overtesting. In addition, narrative inquiry could be used to elicit teacher perceptions about teacher cheating behaviors during benchmark tests, or problems they have had with poor test construction. Research on teachers' scientific and research/testing design knowledge and how it correlates with teachers' feelings and beliefs about standardized testing, data, and related issues would be a very worthwhile study.

The importance of teacher background (childhood/adulthood experiences, personality, influences, and teaching philosophies) with relation to preference for progressive/arts integration activities versus more traditional activities and/or risk-taking behaviors or beliefs about student choice in the classroom might also be warranted.

All teachers discussed the possible effects of mentoring upon new teachers' feelings about arts integration, which suggests the need to take a closer look through narrative inquiry with participant observation and interviews. For example, one could

follow a new teacher over the course of a year and keep a log of ongoing interactions, observations, and feelings related to arts integration. The study could be expanded to include feelings related to overtesting, micromanagement, mentorship, or other issues. A case study related to teachers' inter- and/or intradisciplinary collaboration experiences would be a much-needed study as well. In addition, a study could be undertaken to track content retention and comprehension after traditional, progressive/student-centered, or progressive/arts-integrative activities, such as Saeed's skits. Lastly, Morton mentioned his experience in appointing student leaders from the theater arts department to serve as team leaders in his history classroom. Effects of this strategy could be observed and journaled via participant observation.

Perhaps most riveting of all possible research that could be done at the present time might be related to the district-mandated online textbooks that teachers reported being coerced to use. Research already shows that textbooks, a traditional learning strategy, are not very effective in promoting student engagement or sense of community. How do the online textbooks compare? Are they magically engaging and effective simply because of their online format? Because of the ubiquitous district mandates, we deserve to know. Morton highlighted the pressure that teachers are under to use these online textbooks, including teacher requirements to submit log sheets as proof of student daily usage. Gwendolyn profoundly pointed out that many administrators seemed to think that seeing students using electronic devices constituted "engagement." Both teacher participants had much to share about the effect of district-mandated textbooks upon their autonomy and happiness as professionals. Perhaps it is time for these district-mandated textbooks to undergo vigorous research to assess their effectiveness vis a vis

traditional textbooks, which past research suggests are not very effective at all (NAMTA, 2014; Loewen, 2007; Zhao & Hoge, 2005; Kincheloe, 2005; Joffe, 2015).

Researcher's Personal Reflection

Initially, I was concerned that including teacher feelings of disgruntlement at the current state of education might not have a place in this dissertation; however, the research process proved that nothing was farther from the truth. Teacher perceptions on the social justice impact of Saeed' skits would have been incomplete without this information. Teachers shared myriad substantial reasons why their reports of overtesting, micromanagement, district-mandated materials were absolutely crucial with respect to their continually being stymied in implementing activities that promote social justice in their history classrooms. Further, teacher participant Gwendolyn highlighted concern over the new District of Innovation law and how it might further affect teacher autonomy. I am confident now that any research on the social justice perceptions of arts integration such as my skits must include factors that might prevent the implementation of such effective strategies. Without including obstacles to arts integration, the research would have only painted half of a picture.

If I could change one thing about this study, I would have added another phase to this exploratory study: participant observation of students engaged in Saeed's skits. However, due to my research time frame, I was not able to include participant observation in this study. Therefore, it is definitely on my list for future research. I feel that even though I gained a wealth of information from my teacher participants, participant observation would add new layers of depth, richness, and detail to the whole picture of arts integration such as Saeed's skits and how they serve to engage students

and build a sense of community.

I hope that my research serves as a catalyst for many in the field of education to ponder what it is that we really want to elicit from our students. Is our main goal for them to be able to take standardized tests? Or, is it for them to become adults that have developed a genuine appreciation and love for a subject, who will be empowered to take that forward not only with content knowledge, but the interpersonal and critical thinking skills (such as the ability to see multiple perspectives and relevance) that will allow them to take that knowledge to the next level? I choose the latter, and based on this research, I am certain that my two teacher participants share my view.

It has been immensely personally fulfilling to see my skits, borne of my authentic personality and talents, help my students to love learning and to feel that they are important members of our classroom community. For me, the excitement of seeing a skit come to fruition on paper, and then come to life through my students' performances, is overwhelmingly gratifying. Realizing that various elements of student engagement and sense of community appear to be fostered by the implementation of skits in the classroom has turned out to be a merger of my talents with my social justice goals. Given the path my life has taken, including my parents' influence, the importance that performing arts and social justice have had, my natural personality and talents, the connections I have made as an educator, my love of history and political worldview, my pursuance of a doctorate in education (the fulfillment of a lifelong goal), and the many students with whom I have shared not only my classroom, but my love—this research is truly a representation of me as a human being. It is truly the culmination of almost everything dear to me.

My unique method of fostering social justice through skits is a quest that will never end, as I continue to produce new material on a regular basis. I enjoy facilitating my fellow educators in helping their students gain the sense of empowerment that meaningful learning and teamwork can provide. It is my sincere hope that many more educators will come to realize the tremendous potential they have in their own classrooms, and that this seed (Saeed's skits) can grow and flourish into avenues yet uncovered.

Conclusion

I hope that my research inspires other teachers to try Saeed's skits or other arts integrative activities in their own classrooms to promote social justice in terms of student engagement and sense of community, even in the face of recent trends towards removal of teacher autonomy. It is a non-negotiable that students must be able to access the content before they can think critically, and textbooks and other traditional teaching and learning methods are simply not effective at reaching all learners (Willingham, 2007; Loewen, 2016). Saeed's skits can serve as alternative texts to help students become excited about a lesson, and this may be the key to facilitating meaningful learning (White, 2015).

Many teachers may be exhausted by the ubiquitous expectations of conformity in public schools today, and may not feel it is a battle they have the energy to fight. However, some teachers have managed to incorporate unique strategies such as Saeed's skits even given these circumstances. For me, my skits have been indispensable for almost a decade—akin to an oasis in a desert of boredom. My two teacher participants have also managed to incorporate Saeed's skits on a regular basis over the course of

several years, and their valuable contributions to this study provide evidence that my positive experience was not a fluke.

I want to show, through this research, that there really is another world out there—a world in which classrooms can be transformed into joyous learning spaces. They say that to change the world, one needs to start with him- or herself. I see integration of skits as one way to foster social justice in one little corner of the world: the history classroom.

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Appendix A

Basic Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Note: Bullet-points are intended as a reference for the researcher, to fill in gaps that are not covered by the interviewee in his/her initial response. Also, the researcher may need to use questions not listed.

1. Tell me about yourself.
   - Childhood
   - Personality
   - Educational background
   - Teaching experience

2. What is "social justice" to you?

3. What is your teaching philosophy?

4. What types of activities do you normally use in the classroom? Why? How often?
   - Teacher choice vs. prescribed
   - Traditional (ex: textbook, lecture/notes, rote memorization)
   - Student-centered (ex: group collaboration, jigsaw)
   - Arts-integrative (incorporating art, music, dance, theater/skits)

5. How did you feel initially about the idea of implementing skits as a history learning tool in your classroom?
   - If hesitant, what made you more willing or comfortable?

6. Was there a reason for choosing to use skits with a particular topic or time period?
   - How skits compare with past strategies you've used for teaching that topic?

7. What was your personal experience during the skits?
   - Focus on ONLY the teacher's personal feelings, emotions, and experience while strategy was taking place.

8. How did administrator(s) and/or colleague(s) react to your use of skits in your classroom?
   - Positive, negative, neutral attitudes displayed
   - Whether there is pressure to conform

9. Did you feel that students in your classroom were more engaged when using skits? How could you tell?
   - Attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and/or passion displayed
   - Comprehension/content retention evidenced verbally or in work product
   - Enjoyed school more in general/motivated to progress in school

10. Did you feel that there was an increased sense of community as a result of using skits? How could you tell?
    - Inclusion (ELL, Special Education/504, G/T, Unmotivated, Multicultural, At Risk, Others)
    - Multiple intelligences
    - Multiple perspectives
    - Interpersonal skills
    - Social consciousness
    - Cultural awareness
    - Relevance/real-world connections
    - Interdisciplinary collaboration

11. Do you feel that social justice was encouraged in your classroom through the use of these skits?
    - Compare/contrast classroom environment with traditional, student-centered, and skit instructional approaches.

12. Do you plan to use Saeed's skits again in the future?
    - How?

Appendix B

Sample Saeed's Skit: *Temperance Throwdown*

Topic: Three women temperance movement protesters stage a protest in a bar, circa 1840; one of the women happens to see her very own husband .

"TEMPERANCE THROWDOWN"

A Comedic Look at One Possible Scenario That Might Have Happened During the Temperance Reform Movement

(PEACEFUL CLASSICAL MUSIC PLAYS AS THE CURTAIN OPENS)

Narrator: Three men are sitting in a pub in the year 1840. They are living it up, without a care in the world. Their wives back home are angry at their behavior, and believe that alcohol is evil. They want to ban it entirely from American life. Many of these wives get together to form the "**temperance movement**", which is the movement to ban all alcohol sales and consumption (drinking). One day, a group of women protesters show up at a pub to stage a protest. Unfortunately, it just so happens that one of the women protesters sees her very own husband, Fred, in the pub. Can Fred avoid a nasty confrontation with his determined wife? We shall see…

MAN #1, BILLY BOB: Ahhh….this is the life.

MAN #2, FRED: You sure got that right, Billy, my man.

MAN #3, HAROLD: Fellas, I can hardly stand goin' home to my little woman. Nag, nag, nag, nag, nag!!! Nag about this, nag about that. Nags me even about my dirty underwear on the floor. She won't shut up! I hear her voice echoing in my head all day long even when she's away. I have to come here just to get a break!

MAN #2, FRED—I know just what you mean. Don't EVEN get me started. Why, just this morning, my own "ball & chain" was gettin' all up in my biz. I told her to shut up and know her place,

if you know what I mean…I think women have too many rights as it is. They shouldn't be able to question their men. I think I like the way the Puritans did it "back in the day"…you know…the women had to sit in the back of the church and shut the heck up. Now, that's the life!!!

(THEY ALL HAVE A GOOD, HEARTY LAUGH. SUDDENLY, THERE IS A LOUD NOISE; THE DOOR TO THE PUB OPENS. THREE FEMALE TEMPERANCE PROTESTERS BARGE IN, SHOUTING AND MARCHING AND HOLDING UP SIGNS THE MEN ARE UTTERLY SHOCKED.)

Man #1, Billy Bob: What is this, for God's sake? It's a bunch of women! And they're not accompanied by men! How indecent!!!

Man #2, Fred: (Whispering frantically to the other men) Oh, no!!! It's her!!! Fiddle-sticks!!!

(FRED HIDES UNDER THE TABLE AS FAST AS HE CAN)

Woman #1, Phyllis: (Chanting loudly) NO MORE ALCOHOL! NO MORE BEER! IGNORING YOUR FAMILY IS OVER….CHANGE IS NEAR!!!

Woman #2, Mildred: (*Looking at the men while holding up protest sign*) Hey, all you nutty fruitcakes!!! All this here drinking is soon to be OVER!!! Believe that!!! Our voices WILL be heard, and that is NO lie!!! We may be women, but we're not gonna take it anymore!!! Are we, ladies???

Woman #3, Millicent: (*Chanting, holding up protest sign*) NO, WE WON'T!!! ALCOHOL IS EVIL! ALCOHOL IS SIN!!
IF I HAD MY WAY, WE'D NEVER SEE IT AGAIN!!!

(Suddenly, woman #3, "Millicent", sees someone peeking out from under the table. She puts her sign down and goes to check it out.)

Woman #3, Millicent: (*walking towards the table, curious*) Who is that hiding under the table? You little imp!!! You can't escape our wrath! Come out and face the music, coward!

(Millie lifts the tablecloth and gets a <u>big</u> surprise...)

Woman #3, Millicent: (*Shocked; screaming*) What on God's green earth is THIS??????? Fred, is that you? Fred!!! Don't tell me I am looking at my very own husband! Or, SUPPOSEDLY my husband! This is disgusting!! Of all the low-down, embarrassing stunts you've ever pulled! How dare you degrade me like this in public! Look at you, you no-good bum!!! You're at it again….drinking it up…..not working or tending to your family! You're not a real man!!! You're just a shell of a man!

Man #2, Fred (*Stammering and stuttering*): Uh, Millie, well, you see, we were just, uh, I….. um…….yeah……see, this is not what it looks like…..I….uh……

Woman #3, Millicent: Close your mouth. It looks like you and me are OVER. I will see you in divorce court, moron. You don't take care of me and the kids anyway. You seem to care more about alcohol than your own family. So, toodle-loo, and GOOD RIDDANCE! You'll see me on the streets, trying to rid this world, once and for all, of the evils of alcohol!!! It WILL happen……..and women all over the country will have all of us "temperance ladies" to thank for their families being FREE from the evils of LIQUOR!!!

Woman #1, Phyllis: (*nodding her head in agreement*) That's right, Millie. Tell 'em. They ain't got much longer. **(*looks***

***at the men directly, pointing her finger at them*)** So y'all might as well drink up. Enjoy….cuz your time is ticking.

Woman #2, Mildred: (*raising up her sign again*) We'll be seeing ya, you worthless jokers!

(WOMEN START MARCHING OUT of the PUB, HOLDING UP THEIR PROTEST SIGNS)

WOMEN (*chanting together again as they exit*): ALCOHOL IS SIN! ALCOHOL IS BAD!! WHEN LIQUOR IS GONE, WE'LL ALL BE GLAD!!!

(Door SLAMS behind them. There is an uncomfortable silence. The men just look at each other.)

Man #1, Billy Bob: (*looks dazed and confused*) What in the heck just happened?

Man #3, Harold: We just got told, that's what. **(*looks at Fred, grinning*)** So….she says you're not a man….coulda fooled me! Ha ha ha…..

Man #2, Fred: Oh, be quiet. I'm more worried about those females. They're up to no good. Well, fellas, we better get our rear ends in gear and go stock up on this, um, "beverage", because knowin' those women, they'll nag and nag and nag until they get their way. Then, we won't be able to buy this stuff anywhere! We'll need at least a year's supply!!!!!

Man #1, Billy Bob: (*has an epiphany*) Oh, yeah!!! We can't let that happen! You're absolutely right. Let's go!!! Hurry!!!

(They all put their glasses down, stand up, take one last swig, and start nodding their heads and verbally agreeing with each other. They race off, presumably to go stock up on alcohol)

Narrator: About 21 years later, and after many more protests, the women are finally successful. In 1851, Maine passed a law banning the sale of alcohol. In the early 1900's, the temperance movement sees its greatest success when an amendment is added to the Constitution banning alcohol sales and consumption in the entire U.S. This, however, did not last long. Only 15 years later, another amendment was added to the Constitution reversing the previous one. Why, you may ask? Well, for one thing, too many people were breaking the law.

(Ironic, peaceful music starts. Curtain closes)

Appendix C

Table: Final List of Codes and Operational Definitions

Table of Final Codes and Operational Definitions

Code	Operational Definition
SKITS & STUDENT ENGAGEMENT	*Theme from research question*
SE-ee	evidence of engagement behaviors: interest, optimism, focus, passion, attention, comments, etc. during or directly after a lesson
SE-cr	Content retention: memory, answering test questions correctly, being able to discuss or write about the topic
SE-le	Love of education: wanting to progress in school, wanting to be in class, making future school-related plans, enjoyment/motivation in general, positive or goal-oriented comments about school in general
SKITS & SENSE OF COMMUNITY	*Theme from research question*
SC-s	Sense of safety and belonging
SC-i	Inclusion/differentiation: accessibility of content for all student sub-populations and groups; includes multiple intelligences or different learning styles
SC-mp	Multiple perspectives/points of view highlighted; students can understand the motivations of various characters/historical figures
SC-is	Interpersonal skills, teamwork, collaboration fostered among students
SC-sc	Social consciousness and/or cultural awareness; empathy for the plight of other groups in history (past or present)
SC-rr	Relevance and real-world connections (how one's own experience is similar to that of others; how one fits into the world/universe)
SC-ic	Intra-or interdisciplinary collaboration being fostered among teachers in the school
SC-te	Teacher's personal experience/emotions felt during implementation of skits in the classroom
PREFERRED TEACHING STRATEGIES	*Theme from research question*
T-ts	Teaching strategies personally chosen by teacher for use in his or her own classroom
TS-cc	Teacher discussing comparisons or contrasts between or among different teaching strategies
OTHER	*Themes from interview protocol or completely new themes that emerged during data analysis*

TS-fp	Future possibilities regarding how to use Saeed's skits in the classroom
TS-sc	Teacher willingly gives students some choice or control over assignment; assignments are purposely tailored to individual student interest
TP	Personal teaching philosophy or beliefs
TP-mr	Dealing with modern realities or youth culture
TB	Teacher background
TB-p	Teacher's innate qualities or personality
TB-p/w	Mentions of weirdness, strangeness, oddity in personality, style, teaching methods
TB-i	Specific influences on teacher's teaching style, including personality
WE	Work environment for teachers
WE-n	Negative work environment for teachers (dissatisfaction about current position or some aspect(s) of job, negative interactions with other staff, distrust in school leadership, etc.)
WE-ot	Discussion related to district obsession with testing, over-focus on testing/data, data meetings, test reviews, test previews, assessing teacher performance based on testing data, and/or other test-related items
WE-dm	Discussion related to district-mandated materials, policies, lessons, strategies, books, professional development; micromanagement; conformity
WE-sb	System-bucking behaviors, such as short-term solutions (ignoring directives, continuing to use one's own activities instead of mandated activities, aloofness regarding benchmark data, allegiance to students over administrators, non-compliance, etc.)
BS	Brainstorming causes of, and long-term solutions to, perceived problems in education
SJ	Social justice impact of skits, including teacher's social justice definition
M	Effects of teacher mentoring upon feelings about arts integration (including willingness to collaborate and/or include arts integration into teaching strategies used)

Source: Researcher notes from data analysis

Appendix D

Informed Consent

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON
A CARNEGIE-DESIGNATED TIER ONE PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study

Title of research study:

Teacher Perceptions of the Social Justice Impact of Saeed's Skits
Investigator: Sheryl Raffat Saeed

This study is part of a dissertation being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Cameron White.

Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?

We invite you to take part in a research study because you meet the following criteria:

- Teach American History on a daily basis
- Have experience incorporating Saeed's skits in the classroom
- Are experienced and certified to teach secondary social studies

What should I know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide, and can ask questions at any time during the study.

Why is this research being done?

This study addresses a need for more engaging teaching and learning materials (such as Saeed's skits) in American History classes as a way to promote social justice.

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for up to approximately 3-4 hours total over the course of at least three separate visits.

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll 2 people in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

Research Timeline

Proposed Schedule	Methodological Component	With Whom Will You Interact?	Data Collection Technique
Mid-Late February 2017	Individual Interviews (Approximately one hour)	Sheryl Raffat Saeed, researcher	Audio recording
Late February 2017	Follow-Up Interviews (Approximately 1/2-one hour)	Sheryl Raffat Saeed, researcher	Audio recording
Late February -Early March 2017	Focus Group Session (Approximately 1-2 hours)	Sheryl Raffat Saeed, researcher; One other teacher participant	Audio recording

This research study includes the following component(s) where we plan to audio record you as the research subject: Participant interviews, follow-up interviews, focus group session. Audio recordings will only be used for the purposes of transcription, and will then be erased. At no time will actual audio recordings be used as part of any presentation or publication. Only portions of written transcriptions will be used as part of this published research; pseudonyms will be used.

- ☐ I agree to be audio-recorded during the research study.
- ☐ I do not agree to be audio recorded during the research study.

NOTE: The subject(s) may still participate if he/she/they do not agree to be audio recorded for the purposes of this study; however, the estimated time for interviewing will be significantly increased due to the researcher's need to take notes by hand.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can choose not to take part in the research and it will not be held against you. Choosing not to take part will involve no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time it will not be held against you.

If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator so that the investigator can arrange for another teacher participant to take your place.

If you decide to withdraw early for any reason, your audio recordings will be destroyed and will be removed from the study record.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

There are no foreseeable risks related to the procedures conducted as part of this study. If you choose to take part and undergo a negative event you feel is related to the study, please inform your study team.

The physical, psychological, privacy-related, legal, social, and economic risk to participating in this study is minimal.

Will I get anything for being in this study?

There are no payments as a result of participation in this study.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include helping to add to a body of knowledge that may lead to improved teaching and learning conditions in secondary social studies classrooms by understanding the social justice components promoted by the use of Saeed's skits.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information (such as your real name) to people who have a need to review this information.

We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of this organization, as well as collaborating institutions and federal agencies that oversee human subjects research.

Each subject will be assigned a pseudonym, which will appear on interview transcriptions and related documents, and any descriptions or references made in the published research. The subjects' real name/signature will not exist on anything except this informed consent form.

The sponsor of the research, Dr. Cameron White, as well as the dissertation committee consisting of Drs. Lee Mountain, Bernardo Pohl, and Samuel Brower may also review research records upon request.

We may publish the results of this research. However, unless otherwise detailed in this document, we will keep your legal name and other identifying information confidential.

Can I be removed from the research without my OK?

The researcher does not plan to remove any participants without their knowledge and consent.

We will tell you about any new information that may affect your health, welfare, or choice to stay in the research.

What else do I need to know?

The researcher will maintain open lines of communication with teacher participants throughout the research process.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, you should talk to the research team. Dr. Cameron White is the advisor/dissertation chair overseeing this research study.

Dr. Cameron White

713-743-8678 (office)

University of Houston/College of Education
4800 Calhoun Rd.
Houston, TX 77004

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may also talk to them at (713) 743-9204 or cphs@central.uh.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Signature Block for Capable Adult

Your signature documents your consent to take part in this research.

Signature of subject	Date
Printed name of subject	
Signature of person obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of person obtaining consent	

When applicable, include a checkbox asking if the subject wishes to be contacted for future research (in a similar area and/or conducted by the PI's study team). Contact information should not be collected on the consent form itself.] In the future, our research team may be interested in contacting you for other research studies we undertake, or to conduct a follow-up study to this one. ***There is never any obligation to take part in additional research.*** Do we have permission to contact you to provide additional information?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Appendix E

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

DIVISION OF RESEARCH
Institutional Review Boards

APPROVAL OF SUBMISSION

March 3, 2017

Sheryl Saeed

srsaeed@uh.edu

Dear Sheryl Saeed:

On 3/3/2017, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	TEACHER PERCEPTIONS ON THE SOCIAL JUSTICE IMPACT OF SAEED'S SKITS
Investigator:	Sheryl Saeed
IRB ID:	STUDY00000231
Funding/ Proposed Funding:	Name: Unfunded
Award ID:	
Award Title:	
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Interview Protocol_Appendix A_Saeed.pdf, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.); • Sheryl Saeed_informed consent form.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Telephone recruitment script_SAEED.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • IRB Protocol Template_Sheryl Saeed.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;
Review Category:	Expedited
Committee Name:	Not Applicable
IRB Coordinator:	Danielle Griffin

The IRB approved the study from 3/3/2017 to 3/2/2018 inclusive. Before 3/2/2018 or within 30 days of study closure, whichever is earlier, you are to submit a continuing review with required explanations. You can submit a continuing review by navigating to the active study and clicking Create Modification / CR.

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

DIVISION OF RESEARCH
Institutional Review Boards

If continuing review approval is not granted on or before 3/2/2018, approval of this study expires after that date.To document consent, use the consent documents that were approved and stamped by the IRB. Go to the Documents tab to download them.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system.

Sincerely,

Office of Research Policies, Compliance and Committees (ORPCC)
University of Houston, Division of Research
713 743 9204
cphs@central.uh.edu
http://www.uh.edu/research/compliance/irb-cphs/

Appendix F

Telephone Recruitment Script

SCRIPT

(Telephone script to serve as guideline for enrollment calls)

Hello. As you know, my name is Sheryl Saeed, and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at University of Houston. I am conducting research on teacher perceptions about the impact of skits on social justice in American history classrooms. I am inviting you to participate because you have used Saeed's skits extensively in your classroom and have previously shown an interest in speaking to me about your experiences. Your input will add greatly to the body of knowledge regarding the potential of these skits to improve the learning environment in history classrooms. Please know that there is no expectation of participation because of your past interest. Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Participation in this research will include an original interview that will take approximately one hour. There will also be a follow-up interview that will take approximately 30 minutes to one hour. Lastly, there will be a focus group session that may take between 1-2 hours. If you participate in all three phases of this research, your total time commitment will likely be between 3-4 hours. To reiterate, your participation would be completely voluntary at all times.

Are you willing to participate in this research? If yes, we can schedule our first appointment, where we will first go over the consent form in detail. If you give your consent at that time, we will then proceed with the original interview. (If no, thank you for your time.)

If at any point you have questions, I can always be reached at (cell phone number) or (e-mail address).