Teaching for Historical Understanding: Perspectives from a High School Social Studies Department

A Doctoral Thesis presented by

Christopher S. Jones

ro the College of Professional Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Dr. Christopher Unger

Advisor

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2013
Abstract

This qualitative study examined the issue of history education and its failure to understand and implement the most effective teaching and learning strategies for the discipline. It did this by conducting interviews, observations, and a focus group with a group of history teachers in a suburban high school in New England. While aiming to explain how history teachers’ beliefs about teaching history affect their instructional practice and how much those beliefs have been shaped by their knowledge of current instructional theory, it also defined what constitutes teaching for historical understanding, elicited instructors’ knowledge and beliefs, and compared the two as they are applied in practice. This study highlighted the contextual nuances that both hinder and help the application of best practices by asking the following three questions: (1) How do history teachers in a largely middle class, suburban high school think about the teaching and learning of history? (2) What has shaped their beliefs and understanding of the teaching and learning of history as reported by them? (3) To what degree is there an alignment between these teachers’ stated beliefs about the teaching and learning of history and what is observed in their lesson plans and practice? In the end, the study identified that there are numerous contextual complexities associated with the teaching of history having to do with teachers’ knowledge of history, understanding of pedagogy in the context of teaching history, and their personal belief systems concerning the proper instruction of students.

Key Terms: learning, knowledge, understanding, history, historical
Acknowledgements

While I, as an individual am the one that receives the title Doctor, there is a host of people who deserve a share in the credit. First and foremost is my family who are the most important and without which this would not have been possible. To my incredible wife, Mary, who has supported me by sacrificing her time and the pursuit of her interests. Her encouragement and willingness to take care of our two young boys through 10 hour Saturdays, countless late nights, and early mornings was always there. I will always be grateful for her. My son Tommy, who was two when this journey began, patiently waited to play with Daddy until he came out of his office. Catching moments whenever he could, his parting words to me as he went to bed after I became a Doctor were, “I’m so proud of you Daddy.” My other son Scott, who was one year old at the start, was always sitting on my lap reminding me that life has to pause for some playtime every once in a while. I only hope that they learn from my example of commitment and Mary’s sacrifice, that anything is possible in life if you have people who love and support you. To my mother Donna, who is a pillar of strength. She raised my sister and I as a single parent working all hours. I am still amazed that she still never missed a sporting event, special ceremony, and true to history, my doctoral defense. Her example of courage, spirit, and “never quit” attitude has led me to many successes in life, but this is the biggest. To my sister Denise, who continues to follow her dreams. Some of that has rubbed off and allowed me to think of what could be rather than what is from time to time. Finally, to my in-laws, Tom and Patricia Aiello, who have always been there to help in any way they are able. I’m lucky to have a second father who is always in my corner and a mother-in-law who is so doting of my family.

I offer special thanks to the line of advisors I have had throughout this process. Specifically to Dr. Angela Bermudez for starting the journey, Dr. Alan Stoskopf for getting me
focused, and Dr. Chris Unger for taking me across the finish line. Through his friendly and
caring manner, Alan continued to stoke the fire within and kept it burning. I will never forget his
wisdom and continuous questioning. He deserves special thanks for coming back to serve on my
committee. To Chris, for always making me clarify myself and reassuring me that I was on the
right path...“Onward!” He knew how to tease more knowledge out of me than I thought I had
left. To Dr. Sara Ewell for serving on my committee.

Finally, I dedicate my doctorate to the memory of my grandfather Earl Joseph Fitzsimons
(Fitzy), who was the embodiment of all traits I have already mentioned. He was the man who
taught me how to be a man. His love, courage, sacrifice, and tenacity left their mark on me for a
lifetime. I would not be where I am in life without him. I will always love and miss you,
Gramps.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 3
List of Tables .................................................................................................................................... 7
Chapter I: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 8
   Problem Statement ..................................................................................................................... 8
   Significance ............................................................................................................................... 9
   Practical and Intellectual Goals ............................................................................................... 10
   Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 11
   Summary of Paper Contents and Organization ....................................................................... 12
   Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................................. 12
Chapter II: Literature Review ........................................................................................................ 21
   Historical Understanding, Concepts, and Classroom Practices ............................................... 21
   Knowledge Construction and Inquiry ....................................................................................... 27
   Wise Practices, Meaning Making, and Assessment .................................................................. 30
Chapter III: Research Design ......................................................................................................... 34
   Introduction to the Qualitative Study ......................................................................................... 34
   Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 37
   Methodology ............................................................................................................................. 38
      Site and participants ............................................................................................................... 38
      Data collection ..................................................................................................................... 40
      Data analysis ....................................................................................................................... 41
   Validity Issues .......................................................................................................................... 45
   Protection of Human Subjects ................................................................................................. 48
   Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 50
Chapter IV: Research Findings ....................................................................................................... 51
   Study Context ............................................................................................................................ 52
   Research Question #1 .............................................................................................................. 54
   Research Question #2 .............................................................................................................. 61
   Research Question #3 .............................................................................................................. 66
   Summary of the Findings .......................................................................................................... 77
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings ................................................................. 78
  Revisiting the Problem of Practice ............................................................................. 78
  Review of the Methodology ...................................................................................... 80
  Discussion of Major Findings ................................................................................... 81
  Discussion of Findings in relation to the Theoretical Framework ......................... 88
  Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review .................................. 96
    Historical understanding ......................................................................................... 96
    Classroom practices ............................................................................................... 97
    Concepts ................................................................................................................. 98
    Knowledge construction ......................................................................................... 98
    Inquiry ..................................................................................................................... 99
    Wise practices ....................................................................................................... 99
    Meaning making .................................................................................................. 100
    Assessment ............................................................................................................ 101
    Summary .............................................................................................................. 101
  Final Analysis .......................................................................................................... 102
  Significance of Study .............................................................................................. 104
  Limitations ............................................................................................................... 105
  Validity ..................................................................................................................... 106
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 107
  Future Research ..................................................................................................... 107
  Personal Reflection ................................................................................................. 108

References .................................................................................................................. 112

Appendix A - Request for Consent ........................................................................... 118
Appendix B – Interview Protocol ............................................................................. 120
Appendix C – Interview Questions .......................................................................... 121
Appendix D – Focus Group Questions ..................................................................... 123
List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Table 2: Themes in relationship to the research question: How are teachers thinking about the teaching of history in a largely middle class, suburban high school?

Table 3: Themes in relationship to the research question: What has shaped teachers’ beliefs and understanding of teaching history as reported by teachers?

Table 4: Illustrative quotes regarding the Theme: “Learning experience”

Table 5: Themes in relationship to the research question: To what degree is there an alignment between teachers stated beliefs about teaching history and what is observed in their lesson plans and practice?

Table 6: Illustrative quotes regarding the Theme: “Influence to teach”

Table 7: Illustration and explanation of a participant quote comparing theory and practice

Table 8: Illustration and explanation of a participant quote comparing theory and practice

Table 9: Illustration and explanation of participant quotes comparing theory and practice

Table 10: Illustration and explanation of participant quotes comparing theory and practice

Table 11: Illustration and explanation of participant quotes comparing theory and practice

Table 12: Bloom’s Taxonomy compared to Heuristics Employed by Historians

Table 13: Comparison of lessons between a College and Honors level class.
Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

History teachers are currently failing to understand and implement what current research has determined are the most effective teaching and learning strategies designed to improve students’ ability to think historically (Hynd, 1999; Lévesque, 2008; Mansilla & Gardner, 2009). Specifically, there is a lack of focus on the use of disciplinary concepts and procedures at the secondary level. This is due to multiple reasons, but specifically a misunderstanding of what it means to teach and learn history well is at issue (Mansilla & Gardner, 2009; Grant & Gradwell, 2010). Currently, history curriculums have plenty of standards, but what is not being accomplished is the implementation of what current research constitutes as powerful teaching and learning within the discipline. The core concepts of historical significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, evidence, and historical empathy offered by Levesque (2008) provide a system of classification that contains strategies for such teaching and learning. Unfortunately, issues of mandated testing, controlling student behaviors and covering standards keep even the best qualified history teachers from engaging their students in disciplinary historical thinking on a consistent basis (Lévesque, 2008).

As stated by VanSledright, many historians agree that it is more important for students to possess the capacity for the cognitive tools necessary to critically approach history then absorbing a fixed body of knowledge (2010). History education should address students’ ability to critically assess not only themselves, but the complicated world in which they live, thereby allowing them to attain success no matter their post-secondary plans. Secondary education has continued to fail in spite of new research in its promotion of historical thinking largely due to its reliance on the transmission of master narratives from textbooks (Hynd, 1999;
Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000; Lévesque, 2008). History teachers continue to teach their students a history that others have already written (National Research Council (U.S.). Committee on How People Learn A Targeted Report for Teachers., Donovan et al., 2005).

**Significance**

There is a danger that if students are not explicitly taught multiple ways to test the various claims encountered when studying historical narratives and relics, they will become disillusioned with the notion of what historical knowledge and understanding is, resulting in students not taking the discipline seriously (National Research Council (U.S.). Committee on How People Learn A Targeted Report for Teachers., Donovan et al., 2005). Students will fall victim to the “memory” type of history and continue to take part in a system that has been largely justified by nation building and assimilation. They will also be unable to perform the necessary critical analysis of the complex information given to them on a regular basis (Lévesque, 2008; Alshraideh, 2009). The problem of too much information with too little analysis is forcing education to change. Specifically, students must learn not how to access information but how to synthesize and make it useful (as cited in VanSledright, 2010). Students today face constant change in many aspects of their lives due to technology, globalization, and culture. They need the ability to make well thought out and informed decisions if they are to be productive members of society. (Jawarneh, Iyadat et al., 2008 & Lévesque, 2008).

It has never been more important to move away from the endurance of what Levesque calls a mythical past in an effort to prepare students for the demand of a changing world for critical and educated citizens (2008). In a world where the validity of knowledge is more and more contested, it is the study of history in the 21st Century that is beneficial precisely because it is a field in which knowledge is continuously developing. It mirrors today’s information
overloaded and often polarized society because of its problematic and incomplete nature. Therefore, the development and mastery of historical thinking skills does nothing short of aid students in their ability to understand and act in an often times confusing world. The failure to accomplish a solution will ultimately deprive our society of its most valuable commodity; citizens that are critical, thoughtful, and well-reasoned enough to suspend views until enough evidence has been analyzed and synthesized to pass judgment.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

This research study sought to fulfill two practical goals. First, it aimed to inform and improve the practice of historical instruction. This was accomplished by illuminating deficits in knowledge concerning current theory, addressing the various obstacles that inhibit its routine classroom application, and informing practical, specific professional development. The second practical goal this research achieved was the improved preparation of students to meaningfully participate as a citizen in the 21st Century. To accomplish this, it is imperative that history teachers discover or faithfully implement specific, research based, instructional strategies that improve students’ historical understanding.

The main intellectual goal that this project sought to attain was an increased understanding concerning the acquisition of current theoretical knowledge and its contextual application. Three main issues were illustrated to accomplish this. First, the relationship between current theory, belief, and application was analyzed to understand its complexities. Second, the factors underlying the unsuccessful application of that theory in the classroom were illuminated to help the researcher successfully understand many of the contextual nuances at play. Finally, the aforementioned goals were met so that the researcher could fully grasp the
capability of transferring meaningful practices amongst varying contexts in an effort to improve history instructional practices at the high school level.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How do history teachers in a largely middle class, suburban high school think about the teaching and learning of history?

2. What has shaped their beliefs and understanding of the teaching and learning of history as reported by them?

3. To what degree is there an alignment between these teachers’ stated beliefs about the teaching and learning of history and what is observed in their lesson plans and practice?

These questions explored the complex underlying supports and obstructions to the successful application of theory during instruction. The first question addressed core beliefs. The second was a direct inquiry into instructors’ experiences and how they have affected their understanding concerning current theory and its application. The last question was designed to illustrate the differences or similarities between teachers’ espoused theory and practice. This combination was designed to address the stated problem of practice by seeking a contextual explanation of why current theory in the field of historical understanding may not always be what instructors apply in practice. The questions for this study hinged upon the complexity of human decision making. The teachers’ actions and beliefs may only be understood and explained by hearing their individual voices concerning the context in which they exist.
Summary of Paper Contents and Organization

Moving forward, this study continues with the theoretical framework that sets the foundation on which this study is based. It contains a general explanation of constructivism along with its connection to Vygotsky’s social development theory, Piaget’s cognitive development theory, and Dewey’s pragmatism. The theories of inquiry and problem based learning are also addressed here. A chapter devoted to a review of the literature follows. There are three main themes addressing the nature of historical understanding, construction of historical knowledge, and instructional practices. The next chapter contains the research design, credibility issues, and the protection of human subjects. This research design is a qualitative study specifically intended to capture contextually nuanced data. How that data was collected and analyzed is explained to further clarify how this study increased its credibility and validity while ensuring the protection of its subjects. The fourth chapter of this document details the results of the data collected. It accomplishes this by highlighting major themes that emerged through the coding techniques this researcher utilized. Lastly, chapter five illuminates through an in-depth explanation, the findings of this study; how they relate to the relevant theoretical framework; their connection to the literature reviewed to inform this research; their significance; and implications for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Based upon the problem of practice and what current research describes as the ideal context for teaching for historical understanding, thinking, and inquiry, the researcher chose to use constructivist learning theory as the framework for this study. In fact, researchers explain that use of instructional strategies that promote historical understanding are constructivist in nature and involve classrooms with collaboration, debate, inquiry, and application (Wertsch,
Given that constructivism is a very broad term used to describe many differing types of instruction, it is more narrowly defined for the purposes of this research to mean that as students, we each create a unique reality that is only in the mind of the knower (Cronjé, 2006). Due to the overall scope of this theory as well as the intent of focusing on teaching students, the researcher also consulted the works of Vygotski, Piaget, and Dewey as they applied to both constructivism and classroom practice. Each of these will be covered respectively after a more detailed explanation of constructivist theory.

Currently, constructivism is increasingly influential in classroom practice but is problematic to implement on a wide scale due to two main reasons. First, both constructivist instructional strategies and the learning in those classrooms take time. Today’s push for “more breadth than depth” and “fact based” assessments discourages the use of strategies that slow down the pace of various curricula. Secondly, constructivist theory is based upon an internal learning process rather than teaching practices (Cronjé, 2006). This makes it difficult to provide practical professional development to educators. Therefore, a majority of history classrooms currently practice the transmission of information (objectivist) to students who passively receive the material.

Conversely, constructivism posits that there is no knowledge that is learned absent its personal construction by the learner. This is an active process of learning and takes place both individually and socially based upon an individual’s cognitive level, social environment, and level of motivation. The practice of constructivism not only supports, but requires that instructors allow learners to create meaning from what they are exposed to by analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting multiple pieces of data. This concept is vital due to the fact that the “doing” of
history calls for a rejection of textbooks as an unquestionable set of truths rather than a tool to aid in understanding.

While constructivism puts forward that learning is active and understanding is contextual, it also states that knowledge, which is vital for both learning and understanding, is situated and must be rectified within the individual through an internal process of accommodation, assimilation, and equilibrium before understanding is reached (Miller, 2009). This is the difference between internally and externally mediated realities (Cronjé, 2006). This highlights the problem of practice in the fact that students must be given guidance in their own personal, active construction of knowledge if understanding is to be authentic. Many classrooms today practice the acceptance of an externally mediated reality that only carries knowledge as far as the next assessment. Constructivism calls for the creation of an environment that engages students (internal mediation) with the topic rather than leaving them on the outside as passive observers (Nancy & Marcy, 2002).

**Vygotsky: Social development theory.** Current research concerning the best instructional strategies for historical understanding, inquiry, and thinking call for a more socially than content driven classroom (Barton, 2003; Yilmaz, 2008; VanSledright, 2010). Vygotsky’s theory promoted the creation of contexts for the purpose of achieving that goal. It requires the teacher to facilitate learning by collaborating with students (Knowledgebase, 2010) as they progress from the dependent to independent zone in their development (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). There must be a “balance of tension” in this movement from the student being completely dependent to independent. While their abilities must be stretched if they are to grow, caution must be taken not to frustrate the learner, thereby jeopardizing the learning. Vygotsky posits that this is facilitated in a greater fashion through a community rather than on an individual basis.
This offers students the opportunity to be stretched at varying degrees with multiple supports (Nancy & Marcy, 2002). “Intelligence is not what you know but what you can learn with help” (Miller, 2009, p. 219). Social interaction in a learning context reinforces this. Students internalize information and ways of thinking from their activities. Knowledge is gained then further enhanced by consequential, in-depth contextual discussions. This emphasizes students learning how to learn by observing their own thought process (Johann van der & Julia, 2011).

Students must be introduced to the notion of building their own knowledge by bringing to light the process by which it is created. It is very important to motivate students to engage in their own learning by explaining the process to them (Prince & Felder, 2007).

Vygotsky’s social learning theory becomes even more important when considering the fact that students bring a fragmented sense of their academic self to the classroom. The theory posits that a critical questioning attitude is not likely to emerge if students are only taught to learn as individuals who operate outside any group formation (Johann van der & Julia, 2011).

Therefore, the onus is on classrooms to become collaborative, knowledge building communities rather than close, separate entities that acquire knowledge without an understanding or vision of the greater whole. Vygotsky was a strong proponent of a socio-cultural approach to cognitive development whereby social interaction (or context/environment where learning takes place) plays a pivotal role in an individual’s construction of knowledge. This is more effective with synchronous interaction rather than asynchronous due to the continuous feedback (thus support) that is received (Nancy & Marcy, 2002). For this problem of practice, his theory reinforces the constructivist perspective of the teacher facilitating the students’ attainment of knowledge by scaffolding (Zone of Proximal Development) the information until there is a level of independent participation in the larger community (group for the purposes of a classroom).
Vygotsky believed that learning is an active process of constructing knowledge that should be treated as a cultural artifact to be shared for further use by the community. He also held that knowledge distributed among a group is an aggregate and therefore greater than the knowledge of any single member of that group (Nancy & Marcy, 2002).

It is important to note that, according to Vygotsky, while the process of constructing knowledge always comes from the social interaction with others who are at varied levels of development and therefore offer different perspectives and supports for “making meaning” (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Students must still claim ownership and practice self-direction in learning to increase its usefulness (Nancy & Marcy, 2002). In essence, the context created by both teachers (through the use of specific instructional strategies) and students (through motivation) either allows or stymies everyone’s ability to develop. This point has a direct effect upon the stated problem because it specifically highlights the need for collaboration among both students and teachers if there is to be an improvement in teaching and learning through the creation of a knowledge based community.

Piaget: Cognitive development theory. While research effective instructional strategies calls for increased levels of collaboration and inquiry, it is just as clear concerning the importance of understanding students’ intellectual level for the purpose of ability to access the material (Lee, 2005; Nokes, Dole et al., 2007). This collaboration is especially important while the mental acts of Piaget’s assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium are occurring with students (Miller, 2009). This theory fits into the proposed constructivist framework due to its support of the idea that understanding comes not from receiving, but constructing knowledge once it is rectified (assimilated) on a personal level in conjunction with one’s own beliefs. This lies at the heart of the role played by a student’s prior knowledge. Piaget’s theories also inform
the constructivist theory by offering limits by way of specific cognitive stages. Studied in-depth, these stages offer insight as to what level of knowledge students’ are capable of understanding. In short, they inform the instructor as to the amount of aid expected and needed.

Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey believed that how children structure knowledge is based upon the context in which they currently reside (Miller, 2009). While Piaget’s theory emphasizes a cognitive progression, Vygotsky’s posits that cognitive ability is increased through social interaction. These beliefs coupled with Dewey’s belief that knowledge must be useful to promote understanding, result in the fact that all developmental stages (cognitive and social) are progressed through by the individual’s construction of knowledge and understanding according to their context. This will provide the analysis necessary for understanding the contexts in which students learn best according to their level of cognitive and social development. When taking the constructivist aspect of Vygotsky and Piaget together, it is important to realize that student success is not just a matter of nature versus nurture, but nature times nurture (Shenk, 2010). It is clear that the problem identified lies not only within the issue of what type of strategies help students learn best, but also the context. As Davis put it; it is not the implementation or existence of “best,” but “wise strategies” (Yeager & Davis, 2005).

**Dewey: Pragmatism.** Current research understands that for students to successfully acquire an understanding of history, they must be intrinsically motivated and actively engaged in the construction of appropriated narratives that are personally meaningful. (Wertsch, 2000; Yilmaz, 2008; VanSledright, 2010). Constructivist theory emphasizes that learning is an active process. Building knowledge consists of constructing both meaning and systems of meaning that enable synthesis. This construction is fostered by what Dewey called reflective activity in which there is a focus on the journey of understanding through trial and error and that learning is not
the passive acceptance of knowledge that exists out there, but requires the learner to engage the world (Prince & Felder, 2007) by using and manipulating information in authentic situations (Nancy & Marcy, 2002). People learn to learn as they learn.

Students are taught how to engage through the use of instructional strategies that promote inquiry and problem based learning. These methods also foster historical understanding due to their autonomous and motivational nature. While inquiry based learning emphasizes constructivist pedagogy by requiring the need for facts, skills, and a conceptual understanding if a deeper knowledge is to be built, problem-based learning focuses on solving a relevant problem with no single, correct answer (Richard & Michael, 2011). Development and understanding occur when two contradictory ideas are synthesized into a new idea or phenomena (Miller, 2009). Learning occurs as students co-construct the meaning of a task, goal, and solution. Doing creates knowing. In essence, the inquiry surrounding a problem begins the construction of deep meaningful knowledge (Richard & Michael, 2011). Inquiry and problem based learning are important because they mirror the real world that does not remain conveniently constant (Johann van der & Julia, 2011). Rather, it allows education to adjust to one that is in a state of constant flux and therefore, so is the knowledge base students arrive with. Learning is contextual and therefore the most effective instruction mirrors that fact.

Inquiry based learning addresses the stated problem specifically due to the fact that this method has frequently been proven to be more effective in the development of thinking skills than traditional instruction. Students are expected (as are historians) to ask questions, uncover and connect facts, and draw conclusions using the aforementioned concepts (historical significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, evidence, and historical empathy) to construct knowledge. This, in turn, helps further develop critical thinking and creative problem
solving skills (Knowledgebase, 2010). The need for students to perform these two tasks in an effort to increase their historical understanding is crucial.

Problem based learning is indispensable to the problem of practice precisely because it is held that history is not a stagnant story to be unquestioned, but an unfolding series of events that are perceived differently through the examination of multiple artifacts. This learning has students being confronted with open ended, real world issues that need solving. Students take the lead by defining the problem, taking stock of what they know and what they need to learn, and then proceed to learn it (Richard & Michael, 2011). The five main goals of problem based learning are “…to help students develop flexible knowledge, effective problem-solving skills, self-directed learning skills, effective collaboration skills, and intrinsic motivation” (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Solving problems through inquiry requires students to alter their original line of reasoning and accommodate new knowledge (Johann van der & Julia, 2011). This process resulting in deeper learning requires structural or mental schematic changes (Miller, 2009). As new data is acquired and added to our existing knowledge, our current state of knowing/understanding is changed as well. Understanding is constructed from the interaction of knowledge and experience in a constant reciprocation of accommodation and assimilation until the mental state of equilibrium Piaget speaks of is reached (Miller, 2009). Although these two theories of learning mesh well with the intended accomplishment, they are not without their detractors.

Many of the arguments against the widespread implementation of inquiry and problem based learning are rooted in issues related to content versus skills, depth versus breadth, and hetero versus homogeneous grouping. The effectiveness of both discovery and problem based learning in diverse classrooms is challenged both by the risk of cognitively overloading students
and the lack of “factually correct” prior knowledge. There is the belief that students must possess enough prior knowledge to guide themselves through the process of discovery before they are able to attain success independently (Kirschner & Clark, 2006). If students are not properly supported it has been found that there is an increased amount of student resistance to instruction or learning thus leading to a level of frustration that results in the “shutting down” of the student (Richard & Michael, 2011). Such support and completion of necessary prior knowledge takes a longer period of time than is often allotted in today’s hurried pace in an effort to cover large amounts of material.

Social constructivism has been chosen specifically because it does not espouse the absence of direct teacher instruction, but well thought out, facilitated instruction that takes prior knowledge, cultural inferences, and student readiness into account. Technological advances also inform the decision to use this theory specifically for the ability they offer to minimize or altogether eliminate the negatives associated with the increased time necessary for proper implementation of the instructional strategies associated with constructivism. My analysis of the literature will be through the lens that learning is an active, contextualized process of constructing knowledge rather than receiving it from an instructor. Discovery and problem-based learning will aid in my synthesis between literature and practice by illuminating strategies useful for increasing students’ ability to actively create their own understanding of information based upon its context, supporting evidence, and prior knowledge. Constructivism is designed in a way that learners intrinsically construct their own meaning by building upon previous knowledge and experience (Cronjé, 2006). There is no such thing as knowledge independent of the knower, but only knowledge we construct for ourselves as we learn. Learning is based on previous knowledge and is therefore contextual. Knowledge must connect to the students’
current state if it is to have the optimal effect on a student’s ability to assimilate new information (Hein, 1991). Learning is contextual and therefore active and social. This is important in conjunction with the stated problem given the fact that the “doing” of history calls for the rejection of textbooks and set narratives that contain stagnant, un-evolving answers.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The study of history is beneficial to students in the 21st century precisely because it is a field that is fluid and continually evolving. It mirrors today’s information, overloaded society in its problematic and incomplete nature. Therefore, the development and mastery of historical thinking skills does nothing short of aid students in their ability to understand, act, and be successful in the face of an ever changing, often contradictory world. This selected body of literature addresses questions concerning altering classroom instruction to mirror the practice historians’ use in their investigation of the past, the effect of inquiry and problem-based instructional strategies on a student’s ability to think historically, and the most effective instructional strategies to increase a student’s ability to think historically. They are meant to frame the research and discussion in a manner that progresses from theoretical information to practical application in the high school classroom.

Historical Understanding, Concepts, and Classroom Practices

The first body of literature reviewed concerning the stated problem of practice addresses the question of classroom instruction mirroring the practice historians’ use in their investigation of the past. The difficulties of accomplishing this are rooted in institutional and policy biases concerning curriculum design, assessments and a theoretical debate concerning the very nature of history itself. Accompanying that is the fact that the work historians practice is sophisticated, takes training, and most importantly, time (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000). Therefore, even while
new strategies of instruction are implemented on a narrow scale, classrooms continue to rely on
the “what” aspect of history instead of the “how.”

John Dewey (as cited in Lévesque, 2008, p. 27) once said; “While all thinking results in
knowledge, the value of knowledge is subordinate to its use in thinking.” This statement not
only holds value for its meaning, but sheds light upon two lengthy debates concerning two types
of knowledge in history and the nature of history itself. Currently, the disagreement over the
nature of history lies between Autonomists and Assimilationists (Yilmaz, 2008).

Autonomists, considered idealists in the realm of historical knowledge, believe that
history is more art than science and approach the study of the subject as such. They believe that
imagination (Yilmaz, 2008) or empathy (Lévesque, 2008) plays a large role in the connection of
various historical facts when constructing a larger narrative of events. Assimilationists also
referred to as Scientistics, hold the belief that history is found in the factual evidence left behind
and should be analyzed as objectively as possible. They focus heavily on the “what” of
historical knowledge rather than the “why.” The combination of these two approaches is better
looked at in conjunction with what Pierre Nora terms “memory-history versus disciplinary
history” (as cited in Lévesque, 2008) and weighs heavily upon the instructional pedagogy
employed by classroom teachers.

Memory history, based upon individuals and institutions collective memories, is
positioned more with autonomists due to the large degree of empathy, imagination, and
conceptual bias present in the completed narrative. Disciplinary history, based upon the critical
procedures of analysis, decidedly moves more towards the assimilationist end of the continuum.
A study conducted by Drake concluded that because history is the product of the historian’s
interrogation of primary resources, the discipline itself must insist on meaning over memory
While Gardner agrees by believing that disciplinary thinking is the most advanced way of approaching and investigating issues within multiple domains of knowledge (2007), this researcher posits that a synthesis of the literature enforces the conception that a balance must be struck in an effort to reform education in a meaningful way. That balance may be found in the difference between conceptual and procedural knowledge (Lévesque, 2008; Carretero, 2010), which may be related to the debate among curriculum writers concerning the teaching of content versus skills.

Carretero divides conceptual knowledge into two orders. What he terms the first order (procedural) is a basic version of the who, what, where, when, and how of history. The second order represents the meta-conceptual piece or in other words the broad narrative put together from the first order that offers historical context, author perspective and source reliability (Carretero, 2010). Procedural knowledge is comprised of the tools necessary for the critical study of the past and the construction of new historical knowledge (Lévesque, 2008). Much like the study of history itself there is no correct answer. This is due to the fact that, “it is impossible for students to understand or make use of procedural knowledge if they have no knowledge of the substance of the past” (Lévesque, 2008, p.30). In essence, schools are focusing on the official narratives of history (conceptual) without developing an understanding of how (procedural) those narratives have been created. This leads to an uncritical look at knowledge for the sake of memorization rather than understanding. Strength in the former coupled with a deficit in the latter clearly hinders the ability to construct meaningful knowledge and connect broader concepts. Memorization does not call or allow for the level of acquisition required to test a student’s mental equilibrium to occur resulting in a lack of assimilation (Duckworth, 2006). This may be altered with the realization that historical knowledge is a combination of
both concepts and procedures that rely upon the development of each to improve a person’s ability in either.

The main reason the teaching of historical thinking is highly possible in diverse backgrounds found in today’s classroom, is due to the nature of historical knowledge. Historical knowledge is human construction and therefore, an argument that is ongoing. It is not absolute, but open to differing interpretations as individuals take varied perspectives (Yilmaz, 2008). This conceptual framework bias (Yilmaz, 2008) approach to history must be used as a strength rather than a weakness to be overcome. This is possible when students are taught the proper set of skills to accomplish the construction of an accurate representation of a plausible story based upon the connection of multiple historical facts that at first appear to be disconnected. These connections become more meaningful given the variety of prior knowledge, experiences, cultural beliefs, and perspectives with which today’s students’ enter a classroom.

Understanding that knowledge is in a constant state of construction and is subject to a truth that is known by social influences and the balance of power at the time it was created is key to unlocking the process with which historical knowledge is created. (Hynd, 1999). The current, widely held belief in research is that the most important aspect of historical knowledge for both teachers and students is understanding the how rather than the what of creation. Therefore, it is important to focus upon a widely accepted set of heuristics by which a person’s ability to think historically may be measured. In the end, historical knowledge must be the means to an end that includes a student’s ability to understand complex issues that pertain to the perceived human experience (Yilmaz, 2008) as constructed through their questioning and investigating.

Due to its fluid nature, there must be more of a focus on the process of historical interpretation. Constructing history is more important for the development of thinking skills and
historical skills on a basic level. The three heuristics of investigation, interpretation, and perspective are part of a larger common theme. It is also stressed that the most important aspect of learning and teaching history for both students and teachers is knowing "how" history is constructed more than the stagnant presentation found in most textbooks (Barton, 2003). In fact; “Thinking critically about history is akin to thinking critically about the present” (Hynd, 1999, p. 431). Accomplishing this as a professional, much less in classrooms requires three main elements concerning the construction of historical understanding; a method by which to practice its construction, a set of heuristics (agreed upon by historians), and criteria for the evaluation of the interpretation created (Burenheide, 2007).

The work of Stéphane Lévesque does a fine job of offering a synthesized set of procedural concepts that, when applied, help individuals in classrooms move from naïve to the sophisticated historical understanding attained by many historians. They are historical significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, evidence and historical empathy (2008, p.37). This multifaceted approach offers guidelines for how to begin the task of constructing history by offering understandable, guiding questions that, when answered completely, provide an increased critical rendition. These questions become even more powerful when used in conjunction with a select set of heuristics employed by historians. The task becomes deciding/learning how to use what is offered without becoming overwhelmed.

While Barton and Levstik cite investigation, interpretation, and perspective as the most essential (2003), other members of this field view sourcing, contextualization and corroboration (Hynd, 1999; Carretero, 2010) as critical to successful growth. Clearly, there is some overlap between these selections. More interesting is what has been overlooked by many, but mentioned as a concept and an important aspect of historical knowledge as a whole, especially among the
previously mentioned Autonomists; empathy. No matter its label (skill, heuristic, or concept); empathy, especially due to its influence upon investigative and interpretive practices, plays a large role in the avoidance of presentism when creating non-judgmental interpretations of historical data. It is important to note the overarching concern of the avoidance of presentism in the literature reviewed. It is perhaps best explained by Lowenthal when he states that, “…students are ahistorical. Their own moralities become universal values, from which deviance is infamy” (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000, p. 66). This supports the strong constructivist argument concerning the unavoidable effect personal experiences, contexts, and cultural knowledge has on students’ ability to grasp and manipulate knowledge at various levels. It also assists in setting facts in their proper context so that they may be properly evaluated before being added to the larger body of historical knowledge. Burenheide cites Bevir’s six criteria for evaluating professional historical interpretations: accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, openness, progressiveness, and fruitfulness (2007). These criteria fit well when measuring analytical procedure, the use of empathy and, avoidance of presentism. He goes on to explain that, due to the fact that students are not professionals, it would be appropriate to use only the first four of these criteria (Burenheide, 2007).

Adjusting the questions created by Lévesque’s’ procedural concepts (2008), using select heuristics from the list above based upon the concept being addressed, then applying the first four of Bevir’s six criteria (as cited in Burenheide, 2007), and attaining a balance between memory and disciplinary history; a comprehensive, specific set of guidelines may be created to foster relevant, valid historical understanding by students in the classroom, thereby bringing the practice and learning of history closer to a single body.
To conclude, it is clear that many historians and instructors agree that historical thinking is but the procedure to attain an understanding based upon substantive, seemingly unrelated facts whereas knowledge is precisely that understanding that provides “identity, cohesion, and social purpose” (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000, p. 22). What is still unclear is exactly how to approach the former while still accurately assessing the latter. While the belief that the debate is much more complicated than content versus skills has come to the forefront in academic circles, widespread reform still falls behind the long accepted memory-history tradition that relies on the acquisition of facts rather than process (Lévesque, 2008). This resistance owes its strength to educational accountability mandates valuing breadth over depth, but may again receive the focus it needs with the establishment of the Common Core Standards, which focus more on the deeper acquisition of content literacy rather than the spiraling of shallow knowledge.

**Knowledge Construction and Inquiry**

The second body of literature reviewed concerning the stated problem of practice addressed the possibility of acquiring this deeper understanding of content through the two specific instructional strategies of inquiry and problem based learning. More importantly it was examined with an eye towards these methods’ impact upon a student’s ability to think historically. When discussing memory versus disciplinary history and procedural versus conceptual instruction, inquiry and problem based learning at first glance appear to work well together. Both methods foster the individual and social construction of historical understanding due to their autonomous and motivational nature. While inquiry based learning requires facts, skills, and a conceptual understanding if a deeper knowledge is to be built, problem-based learning focuses on solving a relevant problem with no single, correct answer (Richard &
Michael, 2011). Together, these two techniques address the need for facts to produce concepts with perspective and empathy taken into account.

Duckworth states that students are only able to pay attention to new theories if they contradict current ones possessed. This forces them to devise a new theory that incorporates the old one while assimilating the new (2006). In essence, a theory is necessary if understanding is going to be achieved. There must be more than trial and error. Applied, it means that teachers must force students to pose theories, investigate, synthesize and adjust. Inquiry based learning fosters this type of growth specifically due to its trial and error nature. In addition, the guidance required during this process by either the instructor or peers is shown increase the level of students’ engagement by making them active instead of passive participants in the topic (Nancy & Marcy, 2002). Given the emphasis on collaborative learning through group work, it is important to note that it is still the student alone who is able to advance to the next level of understanding through sustained effort of intellectual conflict resolution (Duckworth, 2006). Therefore, inquiry requires a constant feedback loop. This is attainable on a more independent basis when students perform an experiment in a science classroom. They are unable to progress far without realizing the errors in their theories. Contrarily, teachers of history must instruct students how to narrow their focus before expanding to larger theories. This is possible through the use of problems.

Due to the length of time problem based learning has existed, there is some difficulty stating an exact definition. This is exacerbated by the fact that even while it has been applied to many different disciplines, most official studies completed concerning the application of problem based learning have dealt with the medical field (Gijbels, Dochy et al., 2005). Suffice it to say that problem based learning offers students open-ended problems to not only solve, but
determine what the exact problem is, what they know, what they need to understand, and how to proceed toward a solution (Richard & Michael, 2011). It is important to note that some core characteristics of problem based learning are: student centered learning in small groups, the presence of a facilitator, authentic problems presented at the beginning of a lesson, problems are solved through inquiry and the development of necessary skills, and learning is self-directed (Gijbels, Dochy et al., 2005).

The results of a recent review conducted by Dochy et. al. (2003) concerning areas outside the medical field found mixed, but significant implications for the implementation of problem based learning. While this strategy has a statistically significant positive effect on students’ knowledge application, there was a negative impact on their knowledge base (Gijbels, Dochy et al., 2005). This is an important focal point when determining how to proceed in a classroom environment that is currently assessed with an emphasis on broad amounts of knowledge rather than understanding. Therefore, it is important to incorporate the strategies of inquiry that guide students to facts that span a larger base of knowledge. The benefits of this may be increased through the use of specific formative assessments throughout the course of study.

An example of this was brought to light by Gijbels, van de Watering et al. when they conducted a study in which teachers introduced self-made assessment tasks designed to support student learning throughout the course (2005). Even while encountering problems based upon structure, criteria, and explanations, students who successfully completed all the formative assessments performed better on the final exam (Gijbels, van de Watering et al., 2005). Results such as these not only highlight the need for formative assessment but also illuminate students’ need to learn how to approach problems through proper inquiry methods. It was found that students in the previous mentioned study outperformed their counterparts on non-related test
items as well (Richard & Michael, 2011). A connection may be drawn between this result (apparently due to the presence of more precise and honed thought process) and that of Gijbels, Dochy et al. (2005) who found that students demonstrated a “highly structured network of concepts and principles” (p. 46) as well as the ability to “solve complex problems” (p. 46) after completing courses in which problem and inquiry based instructional strategies were used.

To summarize, formative, authentic assessment is critical to the successful application of inquiry or problem based learning. It is clear that these two instructional strategies have a positive effect on students’ ability to both gain conceptual understandings and apply knowledge to new constructs. Their focus on analysis, synthesis, contextualization of information, and application of knowledge make problem and inquiry based instructional strategies indispensable pieces in addressing the broader problem of practice stated in this study.

**Wise Practices, Meaning Making, and Assessment**

The third body of literature reviewed concerning the stated problem of practice addresses the question of the most effective strategies instructors may use to increase students’ ability to think historically. While the debate continues concerning memory versus disciplinary and procedural versus conceptual history, there is some agreement concerning the inclusion of contextual references, absence of presentism, and linkages to a broader narrative. The importance of instructing students in the construction of history is concretely tied to the debate surrounding the promotion of a heritage style history that serves a predetermined purpose through subjective application and interpretation of facts. Students’ appropriation or belief of the history (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000) they are learning will increase if they are the ones who build it through inquiry, the use of cultural tools either previously owned or guided, and collective, intellectual assimilation. By both providing and requiring primary resources to be used in
instruction, historical understanding may be assessed loosely through higher level questioning that connects the relevance of that history to students’ lives. Based upon individualized nature of cognitive development, there is no one right way to understand a topic. In fact, historical knowledge is much more than a collection of small one sided facts, but rather a synthesis of many different perspectives and “right ways” based upon current circumstances.

Davis’s definition of “wise versus best practices” (high stakes testing) is the most applicable in conjunction with the importance of context and perspective. Contrary to wise practices, best practices infer that there is a set of instructional strategies that increase understanding no matter the student, culture, or context (Yeager & Davis, 2005). While these have yet to be completely explained, those in favor of standardized, content driven testing insist they exist. Wise teaching is just that because “it is not generalizable across students in class groups of different schools and in different circumstances. Wise practice attends to particularities” (Yeager & Davis, 2005, p. viii). Peter Seixas supports this as well. He believes the importance of attention to individualized, current situations is important due to the fact that teachers and students must understand that “today’s methods for establishing truth are no more than today’s methods” (2000, p. 34). In fact, while increased understanding of the fluid nature of historical knowledge bolsters using a theme based approach in the classroom, care must be taken to not predispose students to fall victim to presentism (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000). This issue is critical when analyzing knowledge either gained or resisted through the use of textbooks as instructional centerpieces.

The process of believing, appropriating, or resisting historical knowledge is an essential component of a students’ performance on multiple types of assessment (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000). According to Wertsch, “the issue of how texts are appropriated has hardly been explored
at all, at least in psychological research” (2000, p. 42). The proposed project aims to illuminate that students’ appropriation (or belief) of history will increase if they are the individuals who construct the broad narrative using both self-selected and provided cultural tools. This belief will grow into an understanding that may be loosely measured through higher level questions connecting the relevance to their present lives. Mastery versus appropriation fits well with the theory of history versus heritage advanced by David Lowenthal (Lévesque, 2008) and Nora’s memory versus disciplinary history (Lévesque, 2008). Additionally, the constructivist belief that knowledge must be created by the individual based upon reconciliation with their own prior beliefs and upon reflection, the emergence of new understandings favors appropriation rather than mastery alone.

Peter Seixas lays out three methods for historical instruction that are designed to deal with both sides of the history versus heritage argument. First, teachers could “enhance collective memory by telling the best story and ignoring methods of inquiry. Second, teachers should present history as two sides in a debate through the use of multiple documents and sources. Third, have students address the merits of multiple perspectives and then relate the versions of the past to their political usefulness in the present (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000). Morton makes the point that historical instruction of this new critical type takes time, devotion and training on the part of the instructors (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000). To quote Lowenthal “to fathom history demands sustained effort, and to teach it calls for experience and judgment” (2000, p. 64). Key ideas and understandings take time to develop based upon the developmental level of students (Bruner, 1971). This is why it is important to create opportunities rather than individualized lessons. It is not a question of how fast intelligence can grow, but how far (Duckworth, 2006). Without the prerequisite training it is Morton’s fear that select primary sources will serve the
creation of the kind of ‘heritage’ his colleagues legitimately deplore (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000).

The solution teachers must arrive at is the implementation of a successful method that allows the facilitation of students’ understanding of the world in new ways no matter their current intellectual structures not by individualized lessons, but leveled situations. Students’ personal inquiries must provide the information necessary to build knowledge if there is to be limited bias. It is important for teachers to create opportunity for students to not only develop a variety of schemes, but make connections between them. A student’s mental equilibrium is not attained until this process is completed for themselves (Duckworth, 2006). It should not be overlooked that experienced guidance that recognizes and is able to assess the acquisition of that knowledge on an ongoing basis is required in an effort to address misconceptions.

While discipline specific language is important and shows a greater understanding of content, there must be caution. Language is often a misleading indicator of students’ understanding (Duckworth, 2006). Students’ often create meaning from what they have read rather than merging understanding. This poses the threat of students’ having the ability to use proper language without understanding the meaning or implication behind the words. A dilemma that becomes increasingly problematic given that historical references concerning names and dates are easy to locate and therefore, not given contextual reference upon their retrieval. If students are to possess the tools to study and make meaning of history, it is essential they understand the context of information.

While there is some disagreement among scholars, a major theme that emerges is that the important aspect of gaining understanding is to acknowledge that understanding is not the ability to apply acquired knowledge to a situation because we have a formula, but rather apply that
knowledge based upon new mental constructs, ways of thinking, and context (Gardner, 2007). Whether it is that students themselves must be cognizant of the pitfalls created by the invention of an understanding devoid of “any connection to the full complexity of real situations” (Duckworth, 2006, p. 46), or the problem associated with not instructing students in how to establish a complex, multi-perspective truth for our time” thereby denying them “full participation in contemporary culture” (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000, p. 35). It is clear that there is no overwhelming set of best practices. History tends to be shrouded in “obscurity and disbelief” (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000, p. 65). Students’ immaturity (both cognitively and emotionally) gives way to an increased level of self-centeredness thereby decreasing the ability to appropriate historical knowledge. Therefore, the ability of teachers to practice their craft wisely needs to be the aim (Yeager & Davis, 2005).

Chapter III: Research Design

Introduction to the Qualitative Study

The research design for this project employs a qualitative approach. While qualitative research possesses special characteristics described by many, a clear, concise definition continues to be elusive. Stake (2010) describes its four major aspects as interpretive, experiential, situational, and personal. It is also explained by Creswell (2007) as a situated activity that analyzes, interprets and makes meaning of phenomena in their context. After noting the existence of numerous ways for defining this approach, Merriam (2009) explains the purpose of qualitative research as “an attempt to understand how people make sense out of their lives” (p. 23), delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning making, and describe how people interpret what they experience. (p.14) The most important aspect of all the definitions emphasizes qualitative research as a search for understanding of complex
phenomenon by studying a purposeful sample in a natural setting and explaining the findings through a rich and detailed inductive analysis that takes contextual nuances of the problem into account.

The problem of practice this study investigated concerning the current failings of history education at the secondary level to both understand and broadly implement what current research constitutes as powerful teaching and learning within the discipline was best suited for a qualitative study for three main reasons. Foremost among those reasons is the fact that qualitative research is mainly conducted in an effort to understand and incorporate the nuanced contexts or settings in which a problem or issue occurs that affect results. It is very useful when looking at problems of professional practice because qualitative research examines the complexities of situations rather than attempting to arrive at broad generalizations. Improving this practice can only be accomplished by increasing the knowledge on which it is founded (Stake, 2010). Stake (2010) also explains that this professional knowledge is situational and characterized by an understanding of successful implementation of well-informed practice. Therefore, qualitative studies are best used to examine the contextual performance of professionals and organizations when their knowledge is combined with ongoing practice.

The second reason this study is well suited to a case study is the fact that qualitative studies rely on direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the persons involved in the events (Yin, 2009). Due to the qualitative approach’s heavy reliance on perception and understanding (Stake, 2010), the comprehensive data that is required for a quality case study served to more richly describe the contextual nuances inherent in the problem of practice. Properly investigating the stated problem hinged on the ability to study it in a manner that included many of its aspects. Qualitative studies are most appropriate when the event being
investigated cannot be clearly separated from its context (Yin, 2009). Simply put, the only method of understanding why knowledge is not playing out in practice was to examine the depth of the knowledge along with the barriers to practice. A qualitative study allowed an in-depth examination and explanation of the contextual application concerning wise practices in fostering historical understanding. While best practices are held as methods that are transferable no matter the context with comparable success, wise practices are those adjusted for current situations. This distinction is affected by multiple nuances that defy a broadly generalized solution void of contextual consideration. Best practices are indeed effective, but wise practices take into account that each student, classroom, and school possesses its own inherent context that requires instructional methods to be adjusted accordingly. Therefore, they are reflective by nature (Yeager & Davis, 2005).

Lastly, because the problem of practice to be addressed contained such complexities, a qualitative study proved to be best suited due to its ability to account for a multitude of emergent data. The final reason the stated problem of practice was best suited for a qualitative study is that it asked questions with such complexities that could only be addressed by this method. This arises from the various factors that affect the purposeful and successful acquisition and application of current understandings concerning what constitutes powerful teaching and learning in history. Once acquired, the most important aspect of their application in classroom instruction is context. Therefore, the data used to answer the research questions had to be gathered in a fashion that allowed for the multiple nuances associated with today’s high school classroom if there was to be a rich, detailed explanation that addressed the stated problem of practice.
Research Questions

The principal research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How do history teachers in a largely middle class, suburban high school think about the teaching and learning of history?

2. What has shaped their beliefs and understanding of the teaching and learning of history as reported by them?

3. To what degree is there an alignment between these teachers’ stated beliefs about the teaching and learning of history and what is observed in their lesson plans and practice?

These three research questions required a qualitative approach due to the fact that they sought to explain the complex underlying supports and obstructions to the successful application of theory during instruction. While the question of “how” was explicitly asked, there was a deeper “why” inferred if there was to be a complete exploration. This combination is precisely what fosters a robust qualitative study (Maxwell, 2005; Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009; Stake, 2010) by addressing a stated problem of practice that sought a contextual explanation of why current theory in the field of historical understanding may not always be what instructors consider to be wise practices rather than best practices (Yeager & Davis, 2005).

The main questions for this study hinged upon the complexity of human decision making. The teachers’ actions and beliefs were only to be understood and explained by hearing their individual voices. It is precisely this need for a rich, contextual description that made the study perfect for a qualitative research method.
Methodology

This qualitative study combined applied and evaluative (formative) research (Patton, 2002). While observing and making comparisons to existing theory in an attempt to illuminate contextual nuances that affected its general implementation, its aim was to offer areas for future improvements within the unit of analysis (Stake, 2010). As explained by Corbin and Strauss (2008), it required the researcher to view the issue from the participants’ perspective in an effort to discover possible contributions to the current knowledge base. The qualitative method was selected due to the study’s investigation of a contextual setting where the boundaries concerning practice, theory, context, and understanding become blurred (Yin, 2009; Stake, 2010). Examining teachers in a classroom setting brought forth the multiple nuances that cause instructors to alter their strategies and goals midstream as their effectiveness is reassessed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, the dynamic and evolving nature of qualitative research was necessary to capture a full, detail rich explanation of the relationship between site, participants, research questions, and phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Site and participants. The site chosen for this study was a suburban high school in Massachusetts with a current population of 675 students. It is a non-Title 1 school whose population is 94.4% White (Education, 2012). While the high school has met the Massachusetts AYP metric consecutively for the past 8 years, it is currently revising its curriculum for the required implementation of the Common Core Standards in 2013. This state of flux, combined with a stagnant rate of growth on the Massachusetts Student Growth tool as well as the SAT tests, has the instructional leaders of the school instituting new initiatives in literacy and higher order thinking skills. This is in an effort to boost both the cohort graduation rate and number of graduates attending institutions of higher education above 94.7% and 82.4% respectively.
(Education, 2012). The high school at which this study took place boasts a rate of 100% of its teachers as highly qualified. Six of these teachers will comprise this study’s unit of analysis.

The individuals chosen for this study comprise the History department. They were selected for numerous reasons, but two stood out as main factors. First, their age, years of teaching, and prior experiences offered a variety of beliefs and understandings concerning the study of History and how it should be taught. They have been teaching from six to 20 years. Furthermore, they are evenly spread within that range. There are three who are at six and nine years, two at 12 and 13, and two at 20. This coupled with their age range of 30-51 years of age, yielded comprehensive data. They also all teach multiple grade and academic levels based upon course selections. By way of example, one of the teachers began their career at the middle school level, while two others were a merchant marine and in the music business as first careers. One of the teachers in the department has also won the Daughters of the American Revolution’s Outstanding American History Tear of the Year (State Level) award.

The second reason for the selection of this sample was the relationship of the researcher to both the department and subject. The researcher currently holds the position of Assistant Principal at the selected site and has a background (degree, teaching experience, et) in the subject of history. While this circumstance required the researcher to be mindful of his position as far as bias (addressed later in the validity section) and evaluation were concerned, it also offered positive opportunities. The researcher had practically unlimited access to both the site and participants. Due to teacher observations and evaluations, the researcher had also built both a personal and professional rapport with the subjects. Therefore, the ability to leverage this position became greater. Teachers wanted to speak and perform candidly based on either trust (friendship) or concern (evaluation).
To conclude, this site and participants were very appropriate because it provided a large enough range of both student academic and social backgrounds as well as teachers’ pedagogical and content beliefs that shaped the type data collected. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Yin, 2009; Stake, 2010). Second, the curriculum for the history department, while still evolving, is designed to address higher level thinking skills. Many of its units are common and utilize similar assessments. Having these structures in place lends consistency to instruction across sections with the exception of pedagogy and context. The last reason the selected site and participants were appropriate for a qualitative study is that fact that it is the researcher’s place of employment. This addressed the aspect of the researcher being the key instrument of data collection completing a fundamentally interpretive inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009).

**Data collection.** There were multiple types of data collected in an effort to both triangulate the results and provide a very detailed and authentic rendition of the findings. Although qualitative studies are naturally recursive, there was a purposeful sequence used for this study. It began with individual interviews, moved to record reviews and observations, and concluded with a focus group. It is important to note that member checking occurred throughout the process in an effort to spiral the data back to the individual from whom it was collected to assure clarity and accuracy. Finally, the use of research memos guided both the analysis and direction of the data and its collection.

The researcher began with individual interviews for two reasons. First, it was important to tie the format to the underlying theoretical framework of constructivism. According to Yin (2009) this is accomplished by revealing their personal construction of reality and therefore, their thought process concerning the problem of practice. Accomplishing this assisted in eliciting teachers’ perspectives of the contextual issues facing their practice. The second reason for
beginning with interviews was directly tied to the next step in the process. It was imperative that the researcher gained insight into their understanding of what constitutes powerful teaching and learning of history. Based on the first research question, the researcher needed to be able to cull various salient features that define the individual teachers’ core beliefs concerning historical instruction if effective observations were to be conducted.

The main thrust of conducting classroom observations was to compare the similarities and differences between the written and taught lesson. The observations were one of the most important aspects of explaining both context and similarities between current theory, teachers’ beliefs, and practice. Observations are important because individuals do not always do what they say they do (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In fact, conducting observations is a distinctive feature of doing qualitative research (Yin, 2012). It is always important to combine observation with interviews to verify the interpretations with the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Combining these two methods increased the triangulation of the data collected (Patton, 2002).

The final type of data in the series came from a focus group. The main purpose of this was to gain new insights concerning the analysis of the interviews, lesson plans, and observations. This was accomplished by presenting interesting patterns in the teachers’ thinking and teaching that emerged. The researcher then asked the group to comment on and clarify these insights to make sure the essential meanings of what had been discussed by the focus group members was captured.

**Data analysis.** The purpose of qualitative research when viewed through the lens of a constructivist theoretical framework is to analyze and provide a rich description of how individuals construct their world based on their personalized interpretation of the meaning of their experiences (Gibbs, 2007; Merriam, 2009). To accomplish this in a sensitive and thorough
manner Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest three steps. The first two are, “always compare knowledge and experience against data and work with concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions” (p. 33). This strategy kept the researcher from focusing on the minutiae rather than the similarities and differences in the data. More importantly, it allowed the researcher to use his prior experience, knowledge, and relationship to the context in a reflective manner that yielded greater insight during the analysis of data. When addressing the central question concerning the application of current theory in practice, it is important to note that the researcher analyzed the data through an iterative process in an effort to not only stay true to the qualitative method, but the theoretical lens of constructivism as well.

Coding and analysis of the data for this study began with handling and organizing the data through the use of a computer assisted data analysis tool (CAQDAS) (Gibbs, 2007). Specifically, the MAXQDA program was selected. The second stage followed a pattern consistent with the iterative nature of qualitative analysis. Analysis did not wait until all the data had been collected, but started with the creation of field notes and research memos as interviews, observations, and focus groups were conducted (Gibbs, 2007). This allowed the researcher to acquire clarification, fuller explanations of the data, and a large variety of codes with which to start.

As Patton (2002) explains, analysis and coding will follow a spectrum of “generative and emergent” (p. 436) at the beginning to “confirmatory” (p. 436) at the end of the process. To begin, the researcher used what Creswell refers to as predetermined codes (2009). These codes were based on grouped segments of the interview questions and focus group. These segments were aligned with the study’s questions and focused on obtaining information that would further inform the rest of the process. Second, the transcribed interviews, focus group, field notes, and
memos were put through a process of open coding based upon a combination of emergent themes, existing patterns identified through earlier analysis, and recurring language. Specifically, the researcher kept watch for educational catch phrases and language that matched the research questions.

Once this was complete, the data was then re-coded to capture any patterns (Creswell, 2007) and reduced through the process of analytical coding. This was done in an effort to both understand the participants meaning within their language and create meaning through analysis by looking for the smallest pieces of information that by their relevance created recurring themes (Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2009). Finally, when themes emerged that clearly articulated findings based on the research questions, saturation had been reached. This allowed for the natural development of the meaning present in the data and followed a pattern consistent with the iterative nature of qualitative analysis. Additionally, this ongoing process addressed the challenge of “making sense of massive amounts of data” (Patton, 2002 p. 432).

Determining significance also played an integral role in the process of analysis. Saldaña (2009) describes this process as four steps that move from the particular/concrete to the abstract/general. The first cycle was a combination of in vivo (quoting words and phrases), predetermined, and open coding (Saldaña, 2009). The predetermined codes that formed a framework served two purposes. First, it assisted in the organization of the large amounts of data by utilizing the questions asked during the interviews and focus group. Second, it aided in the connections and the foundation of understanding during the open coding that followed. By following this process, the researcher was able to discern which statements fit together based upon the context in which they were made. It also aided in the creation of categories and eventually themes by highlighting similarities and differences throughout the data as a whole.
The last two steps were themes and theory respectively. This continuum allowed for the natural development of meaning within the data. Patton (2002) describes this process as convergence and divergence.

Convergence is the concrete process of figuring out what small details fit together. You begin the process by finding “recurring regularities” (p.465) and creating categories. These categories must then be assessed for their similarities within and differences without. Patton (2002) labels this as “internal homogeneity” and “external heterogeneity” (p. 465). The researcher accomplished this by ascertaining similarities and differences within and without the predetermined codes, which informed the creation of themes when juxtaposed with the open coding results. Divergence is the step towards creating themes. This is accomplished through the process of linking what the researcher already knows with emerging connections among data and the new information created by the two. Patton (2002) calls this process “extension, bridging, and surfacing” (p. 466). By way of example, the researcher would note a specific theme that arose in the data. It would then be compared to what the researcher already knows and any relevant field notes and memos that would further inform the theme through contextual information surrounding the data. Once this process was complete, the researcher then analyzed his more explicit explanation of the theme in relation to the other emergent data. This process of analysis perfectly mirrored the stated problem of practice concerning the consistent application of theoretical knowledge in instruction.

The researcher followed the process of eliciting significance by examining multiple sources of data for triangulation, considering context, and making connections based on prior knowledge of the participants and the context in which they practice their craft. Patton (2002) discusses the determination of substantive significance by asking four questions of the data.
These are akin to the three questions posed by Alan Stoskopf (2012) concerning how the data confirms, contradicts, or complicates what current theory professes. First, the analysis must be found to be consistent with the data. This was accomplished through the triangulation of all the sources of data being analyzed for this project. Second, the extent to which the data increases the researchers understanding of the topic. Third, the level of confirmation or rejection of current theory by the new data must be analyzed. Finally, the actual usefulness of the data must be determined. The theoretical lens of constructivism calls for the reality of the classroom to be examined in an effort to understand the main research question concerning the application of best practices.

**Validity Issues**

Qualitative methods of investigation use a different means than traditional, quantitative methods for determining the overall trustworthiness of the results. The traditional terms quantitative research uses to determine this are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posed “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (p. 300) as the counter parts to these terms. A brief comparison of these is necessary when explaining the validity of this project.

In quantitative research, validity is the instrument used to determine whether or not the research has been completed properly. The two subcategories that determine this are internal and external validity. Internal validity seeks to measure the strength of relationships between different variables being studied, while external validity addresses the ability of the results to be generalized across a larger population. This is counter to qualitative research that recognizes reality is constructed by the multiple perspectives of those who experience its current context (Stake, 2010). Therefore, qualitative methods use credibility and transferability to determine the
completeness of the research. This is supported further by this project’s theoretical framework of constructivism. Accepting the “…assumption of multiple created realities, there is no ultimate benchmark to which one can turn for justification” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 295), qualitative research derives its credibility from the original constructors of the data provided in a real context. Therefore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert, if the researcher has “represented those multiple constructions accurately” (p.296) using triangulation and member checking, a more accurate depiction of reality as it is perceived by those existing in it will be given through qualitative methods. This study made use of both these techniques. Specifically, triangulation of data sources was used to build credibility of the analysis. This was further bolstered by member checking that occurred after each piece of data was collected. By way of example, interviews were checked as were observations. Finally, the focus group acted as both a final clarification of any analysis that had occurred prior and a venue to expand the data.

The expansion of data and results is the purpose of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The measurement for success in this area is labeled external validity and transferability respectively. Success in quantitative measures consists of results being considered reliable, which is defined by multiple repetitions of the inquiry with similar results. This may be possible, but only if the context remains the same in both instances. However, while facing the same problem, qualitative inquiry operates with the goal of transferability in mind by taking into account various mitigating effects, accounting for them, and placing the responsibility on the receiving rather than the sending context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is addressed through the iterative process of data collection, analysis, and a transparent, clear explanation of the process and context. It is because the qualitative researcher takes into account the varying contexts of multiple sites by adjusting the research questions, data collection, and analysis methods that
dependability is increased. Therefore, qualitative results must contain a rich enough description to inform transfer to other settings. This study specifically addressed this need through the use of multiple sources of data that were unable to be analyzed and then explained without a complete understanding of the context in which they were collected. This circumstance lent itself to a complete, thick description.

Objectivity of the researcher also lends itself to a study’s credibility. The conventional or quantitative view of objectivity is an inquiry and analysis that is value free and devoid of any subjective belief or influence on the part of the researcher. Conversely, the qualitative method focuses on confirmability. Qualitative inquiry accepts that objective analysis is an elusive endeavor and therefore, embraces the fact that the researcher brings relationships, position, experience, and specific knowledge to the collection and analysis of data. It looks to move the burden of objectivity from the researcher to the data being gathered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By doing this, it is the analysis that must be confirmed by those who provided the data if it is to be considered credible. Lincoln and Guba (1985) declare that, “what a number of people experience is objective and what a single individual experiences is subjective” (p.300).

The confirmation of analysis was a key issue due to the researcher’s position within the research site. As the Assistant Principal and possible evaluator of the participants, the researcher had to make use of specific advantages and overcome inherent biases to attain credibility. This was accomplished by analyzing reflective memos and member checking the analysis that was born from them. There were also multiple data sources that provided either confirming or conflicting evidence of analysis. It was the researcher’s concern that prolonged engagement in this case served more as a detriment due to his current presence in everyday affairs. It is the root of many preconceived notions. The researcher’s accumulated knowledge was also a strength
provided it was kept in mind that “…findings are a product of data plus what the researcher brings to the analysis” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 32) as well. Therefore, the task was to perform what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call “persistent observation” (p.304) in an effort to gain depth. The greater amount of in-depth examination, the greater chance to reflect, track the researcher’s analysis, and check with those who have provided the data.

At the start of the research project, the majority of relationships between the researcher and teachers had been very positive. It was understood that concern surrounding contractual evaluations could possibly hinder the production of rich, in-depth information from the participating teachers. It also may have caused some hesitation for them to participate. In an effort to curb any negative effects upon the collection of data, two steps were taken to address the issue. First, none of the teachers taking part in the study were placed on the researcher’s assigned list of teachers to observe and evaluate. Second, there was an offer for a memorandum of understanding that was acceptable to all parties to be drafted with the assistance of the union president and their attorney. While not necessary to complete this undertaking, the main thrust of the agreement would have been to assure all participants that they would remain anonymous and data collected would in no way affect their normal contractual evaluations.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The largest ethical concern this study contained was the relationship the researcher had to the participants due to his position within the school. While it contained no more than their perceived risks professionally, there was a very real concern pertaining to the fairness of the inquiry. This arose from the history of day to day interactions between the participants and researcher. There was a plan followed that contained permissions and guidelines addressing these concerns.
The participants in this study were all history teachers and therefore, have been the subjects of observations and evaluations by the researcher. This was not only a cause of wariness by them as the data collection process unfolded, but the researcher as well. While it was difficult for the researcher to thoroughly reflect on the data given his prior interactions and observations of the teachers in their practice, there were a few steps being taken to assist in the creation of its honest interpretation. First, there was a continuous outstanding offer to create a memorandum of agreement between the teachers and researcher. This agreement (if ever created) would have acted as a guarantee that none of the data collected would be used for the purpose of professional evaluation. The second and third methods designed to keep the interpretation of the data as contextually accurate as possible were the vigorous application of member checking and triangulation. Finally, there was an effort to preserve the relative anonymity of the participants through the use of pseudonyms and indirect references to the classes from which the data was gathered.

Permissions necessary to gather this data was the second area of concern. While the researcher had unrestricted access to the site and participants due to his position, this increased amount of examination required approval at various levels. First, teachers were offered the opportunity to participate. This was distributed to them in the form of a letter that gave both a brief summary of the study and their protections for reassurance. Second, letters requesting permission were forwarded to the Principal of the building and Superintendent of the district. They briefly outlined the scope of the study, the participants, and the precautions in place to protect the participants.
Conclusion

This study addresses an important, but often overlooked aspect of the stated problem of practice. While it is true that a large portion of history education is currently failing to implement the most effective teaching and learning strategies, quite often the method for addressing this is sought after by analyzing students rather than the teachers. By addressing the questions of how teachers’ beliefs concerning history and their understanding of current theory affect their instruction and why, this study explains the complex underlying supports and obstructions to the successful application of theory during instruction. This study was designed to be qualitative due to the fact that today’s classroom is a dynamic context that is far from the sterile, controlled environment required by quantitative methods. It was designed to not only address the issue of the application of theory in practice, but to ultimately inform professional development in the area. The research design for this project was well thought out concerning the types of data to collect, how to analyze them, and methods for addressing any issues that may arise concerning the validity of the findings. The data collected represents a comprehensive picture of why a teacher plans a lesson (theoretical understandings) through interviews, how that lesson is delivered (practical application) through observations, and finally a collective response to conclusions the researcher has arrived at through focus groups.

MAXQDA was used to help organize the volume of data that was collected. Moving forward with the analysis, the researcher stayed true to the iterative process of qualitative research. The researcher followed Patton’s (2002) process of “extension, bridging, and surfacing” by practicing convergence and divergence. Conducting these processes on an ongoing basis allowed not only for the triangulation of both data and results, but any necessary
adjustments that arose as conclusions were member checked in an effort to yield credible and trustworthy results.

The researcher’s background helped with convergence during analysis, but posed risks to the validity of the results. The fact that the researcher is the direct supervisor of the participants required that precautions were taken to protect both the validity of the data and the identities of the teachers. Assuring that no information concerning identity would either be shared or used for professional evaluative measures was key to improving the quality of data provided. This guarantee took the form of formal agreements that the researcher and participants entered into before the project began.

The research design was appropriate for the questions posed due to its emphasis on observing theoretical application in a highly contextual setting. This is the closest to what Yin (2012) describes as the purpose of a qualitative study. The fact that it provides an “invaluable and deep understanding” that hopefully results in “new learning about real world behavior and its meaning” (p. 4).

Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to report and discuss the key findings of this research study looking at six teachers in a history department of a suburban high school. The study consisted of individual interviews with each of the six teachers comprising the department, an analysis of multiple lesson plans across all participants, eight observations of classroom lessons across the participants, and a focus group with the entire department. The first section provides a brief review of the study context. The next three sections present the themes that emerged from the data in relationship to each of the three research questions. And the final section presents a summary of the findings.
Study Context

This qualitative study was designed to better understand the implementation of what current research deems the most appropriate strategies for the teaching and learning of history at a suburban high school. This high school of 675 students is currently revising its curriculum for the required implementation of the Common Core Standards in 2013. This state of flux, combined with a stagnant rate of growth on the Massachusetts Student Growth Model\(^1\) as well as the SAT tests, has the instructional leaders of the school instituting new initiatives in literacy and higher order thinking skills. The data collection followed a specific protocol that allowed for the researcher to take full advantage of the iterative nature of qualitative studies. The researcher started with individual interviews of each participant, then analyzed lesson plans, observed classes, and finally conducted a focus group with all participants.

Teachers’ voices were essential to this process due to the personal answers required concerning their beliefs. The participants were very helpful in assuring open dialogue and honesty. Students in the classes observed were fully informed at all times of the researcher’s purpose for being present. The participants in the study ranged in age, years teaching, certification, level of education, and previous careers (see Table 1).

\(^1\) The Student Growth Model is the graphic representation of how much a student grew academically over the course of a year in comparison to his or her academic peers. This is based on a growth score, called a Student Growth Percentile (SGP). SGPs are percentiles (ranging from 1 to 99) calculated by comparing one student's history of MCAS scores to the scores of all the other students in the state with a similar history (academic peers) of MCAS scores. SGPs complement the MCAS year-by-year test scores and are meant to measure change in achievement over time (amongst peers) rather than grade-level achievement (amongst local cohort) results in any one year.
Individual interviews were based on a series of set questions. These questions were broken into three specific sections: demographic information, beliefs and understandings concerning the teaching and learning of history, and personal learning experience. While all participants had the opportunity to answer a consistent set of questions to maintain consistency of the data across participants, there were times that either additional or fewer questions were asked based upon responses. The analysis of lesson plans and classroom observations were conducted to gain information concerning the matching of teachers’ practices with their interview answers. Finally, a focus group was held based on the data that had emerged from the three prior instruments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Certification(s)</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Previous Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. R.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5-12 History</td>
<td>Masters in Marine Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Masters in History</td>
<td>Marine Fisheries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. M</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8-12 History</td>
<td>Masters in Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Principal/Principal</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. G</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8-12 History</td>
<td>Bachelors in History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marine Yacht Damage Consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. K</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8-12 History</td>
<td>Masters in Secondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. P</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8-12 History</td>
<td>Masters in History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Production and Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. M</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8-12 History</td>
<td>Bachelors in Justice and Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private investigation and security</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question #1: How do history teachers in a largely middle class, suburban high school think about the teaching and learning of history?

Due to the qualitative nature of this case study, it was essential to derive the participant’s beliefs concerning the teaching and learning of history to fully develop useful questions. To accomplish this, the researcher gathered and analyzed data from a set of pre-observation, individual interviews and a post-observation focus group. This offered a data set with two advantages. First, the interviews provided a semi-private venue in which the teachers possessed the researcher’s undivided attention. This allowed for a level of openness and depth that is often not displayed while other colleagues are present. Second, the focus group facilitated the various relationships that are present within the department to surface; resulting in disagreement, new understandings, and the participants own discoveries.

The researcher created three predetermined codes based on the interview questions. Two more predetermined codes were then created specifically for the focus group based on consistencies and inconsistencies witnessed during the observations. Finally, the seven transcripts (six interviews and one focus group) were coded for patterns and themes with a focus on the first question.

As can be seen in Table 2, four themes emerged as a result of the interviews and focus group conducted, and are discussed below.
Table 2

Themes emerging from the question: How are teachers thinking about the teaching of history in a largely middle class, suburban high school?

- The purpose is to make use of history as a tool to gain a greater understanding of who we are in the world and make adjustments to our lives because it is the glue that brings everything together.

- Learning and eventually true understanding cannot take place unless the teacher has gained the trust of the students.

- Engagement builds interest in students which allows them to become immersed in the subject; thereby gaining understanding rather than knowledge.

- Learning needs to matter. If it is not personally relevant, students will not make connections, build the ability to analyze and synthesize material through created opportunities in their world, and gain understanding.

The purpose is to make use of history as a tool to gain a greater understanding of who we are in the world and make adjustments to our lives because it is the glue that brings everything together. The teachers who took part in the interviews and focus group overwhelmingly voiced that the purpose of history is to understand the how, where and why of our current existence within a larger (global) context. Participants illustrated this understanding of moving from self to global awareness during their interviews when they stated, “Knowing history is knowing ourselves. We don’t know history, the history… even world history, we don’t know ourselves as human beings,” “it is to gain a greater understanding of who we are in the world around us,” and it is the social, I guess, math problem of the world. It lets you be a problem-solver, that if you can actually sit back and study something that historically happened then you can apply it to the future and maybe have a bigger impact on people socially.
During both the interviews and focus group, all but one of the participants focused on the purpose of historical instruction being the acquisition of skills that, due to the nature of history are transferable to multiple situations. They further supported this by saying, “successful application of historical skills allow students an opportunity to be successful in all their future decision making opportunities.” The dissenter continued to answer this claim by insisting “You can skill yourself out of the tree, but it’s the content. Skills are useful, but in the end, it’s the content, because if it was all skills, then we could just make stuff up.” One participant in particular during the focus group led by declaring that the learning and teaching of history is important because, “when you walk outside the classroom that whole paradigm doesn’t exist. It exists, but not in an institutional framework.” When pressed about which paradigm he was referring to, the participant explained “teaching and learning.” This answer clearly struck a chord with the rest of the group who enjoyed a 30 second tangent concerning the idea that life is always about learning, just not always in a recognizable format. Participants also believed that history provided the richest opportunities to gain skills that would allow students to attain higher levels of thinking due to the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis (main indicators of understanding) required by their subject on a regular basis.

**Learning and eventually true understanding cannot take place unless the teacher has gained the trust of the students.** While all of the participants referred to teacher-student relationships as a major factor in their ability to facilitate students’ acquisition of historical knowledge and understanding, the foundation of those relationships repeatedly returned to trust between the student and teacher. While there was a subtle nuance to how this thought was expressed, it was never the less present among all participants. By way of example, one teacher stated during an interview that:
When I look back on some teachers that I had from high school and college they were teachers who were able to earn our trust. If I trusted an individual, I was more willing to commit myself and learn in their class. There was something about them that would gain the trust of students and they were truly the special teachers in addition to being good in their craft.

Another teacher simply, yet insightfully explained how a person builds that trust through understanding when they said, “You have to have a sense of commitment to the kids and I think a sense of empathy as well.” These two statements were made in a safe context for teachers and were therefore less guarded statements. Conversely, statements concerning student trust were made with qualifiers during the focus group. Teachers would use these and observe body language to judge the statements level of acceptance before continuing. One participant was clearly concerned with their colleague’s opinion when they stated:

I don’t want to use cult personality but when you buy-in to a teacher and you trust a teacher, you’re willing to trust them and do things that as a student, take the students a little bit out of their comfort zone and make students do things a little differently than they’re used to and it’ll work, it’ll be effective if they trust you and they believe in you.

Another, who was comfortable with the researcher during the interview, used a qualifier that displayed discomfort during the focus group when they said:

It isn’t always necessarily the actual, the best practice, or how it was done. It’s more about relationship. I think that’s very important and sometimes, well more than sometimes, gets lost and we’re trying to figure out what needs to be done to make things better.
The issue of trust clearly came through when speaking to other teachers. It was clearly a concern that while they recognize the issue of trust is very important to learning, they hinder open dialogue amongst themselves due to a lack of its presence. In fact, another participant felt the need to support another’s statement concerning best instructional practices by stating:

Well, if it’s the best practice for the human, the person that’s going to have to create this two way street or multiple avenues of education because it’s a relationship between teacher and student. We don’t just say, okay, here you go, press this button on me and I’m going to facilitate your learning.

This was clearly said to emphasize a caring for reaching students where they are each day rather than using what “some researcher who hasn’t been in a classroom thinks works best.”

This theme caused a small, but significant overlap with research question #2 that emerged when comparing statements made during the interviews with those of the focus group. The relationship between the participants past experiences (concerning the trust of a teacher) as students was directly related to the importance they placed upon the very same characteristic. Specifically, the more teachers the participant had trusted, the more critical that aspect is to their educational philosophy.

**Engagement builds interest in students which allows them to become immersed in the subject; thereby gaining understanding rather than knowledge.** The participants in this study all spoke of the importance of engagement. Four of the six agreed during both the interviews and focus group that their level of engagement is almost as important as the students for successful teaching and learning to take place. Additionally, those four who placed their level of engagement as (if not more than) important as the students, described how they accomplish that climate. They teach “…them the skills in an engaging way – and I believe the
skills of a historian are engaging…” and “my philosophy, is that you do the work the historians
do and make it interesting.” It was clear that four of the six participants believe that teaching
students by using those skills employed by historians increases engagement for everyone
because, “…everyone’s listening and pondering and interacting with that position. Again,
treating them like a historian.”

Teachers went on to say during the focus group that by using this strategy, “the kids are
engaged in trying to solve certain kinds of problems in history” and moving “towards a goal of
putting their stamp on what they’re learning. It's the process of what, say a historian does to write
that book and make that new insight.” While teachers used this strategy to increase their level of
engagement, they made little if any mention of teaching students to use the same. Only one
participant explained during the focus group that:

I think again, my whole belief is you teach history like a historian you teach the craft the
best way that you can to who you’re teaching, whatever level or grade level that you’re
doing. I think I instinctively knew that historians read, write and then give lectures or
speeches or whatever it is, presentations and conferences, things of that sort…If you put
the skills of a historian as the skills that you're valuing, content’s going to come.

This reinforced the subtle point that the teachers viewed their level of engagement more
essential to the success of a lesson than that of the students. Of the two participants who did not
mention any connection to skill based instruction, one expressed the opinion that good teaching
and engagement is, “defined by and depends on the class.” The last participant gave the opinion
during an interview that engagement comes from entertainment. In fact, he stated, “Some days
I’m very content-based and some days it’s like I’m comparing it to just working the room like
Vegas.”
Learning needs to matter. If it is not personally relevant, students will not make connections, build the ability to analyze and synthesize material through created opportunities in their world, and gain understanding. Most of the participants agreed that learning needs to hold some relevance to take place. The more personally connected to the students’ lives, the greater opportunity for students to gain deeper understanding. There are multiple methods participants use to accomplish this, but there is clearly a concerted effort to create direct connections between the material being taught and students’ lives. It is important to note the different approaches utilized to help students connect. Some of the participants stated that they used very concrete, current examples in their assignments to make the bridge between the ideas in the class and the world students know. When addressing a question during an interview concerning the establishment of that connection one replied:

It never changes. It never stops, always can relate I, talk about Carnegie. I’m just going to relate it to this year. We talked about Carnegie and talked about Rockefeller, easily relate it to Bill Gates and anti-trust laws that he had, more interestingly, when you talk about the doctrine of wealth with Carnegie.

Another teacher described how they facilitated a student making connections to the material with the following explanation:

History is a chain. When I teach it, I like to visualize because I think, for me, when you make visualizations, you can make easy connections. I often encourage my students as we’re either going through sections to either draw or picture, especially in European history, draw a picture of something whether it be a king’s jeweled crown or a sword or something where it will link you back to that thought. Because if you learn history through knowing the connections, you’re ability to recall each connection will be
effortless and it’s little simple things like that. I always try to make … if I’m introducing something, I always try to explain the link.

There was one teacher who held firm in both the interview and focus group when explaining that students need to concentrate on making more connections on their own. When pressed how (if at all) they facilitate that process in class, the explanation was as follows:

An ideal class is where kids are making connections, and they are making connections with some things presently going on and they are making connections between cause and effect in the past of history. They are connections that students are making, and I can facilitate that rather than just trying to serve it to them.

It was clear that many of the teachers focused on the need for students to make connections, there was disagreement concerning how to facilitate the process.

**Research Question #2: What has shaped their beliefs and understanding of the teaching and learning of history as reported by them?**

Teachers were asked direct questions addressing their decisions concerning methods of instruction. This was done for two reasons. First, the researcher desired to compare early influences and personal backgrounds to current contextual influences and practice. This study also required an understanding of why the participants believe what they believe. The genesis of the teacher’s understanding of how history should be taught and what constitutes understanding is at the heart of their actions.

Comments offered by the participants were analyzed and then juxtaposed with actions in the classroom and statements made in the focus group. While each participant gave concrete answers when answering specific questions, a more nuanced representation emerged from the
focus group and data. The themes illustrated in Table 3 represent a composite of responses received during individual interviews and the concluding focus group.

Table 3

Themes in relationship to the question: What has shaped teachers’ beliefs and understanding of teaching history as reported by teachers?

- Teachers’ experience as students has directly affected their theory and practice in the classroom.
- The nature of the teachers’ influence to teach has a direct impact on their beliefs and vision of what good teaching looks like.
- Teacher’s current level of satisfaction with all aspects of their job affects their beliefs concerning the teaching of history.

Teachers’ experience as students has directly affected their theory and practice in the classroom. All of the participants interviewed conveyed memories of how teachers affected their learning rather than what they received from their experience. The group contained mixed responses however when juxtaposing their opinion of the teacher who stood out in their memory and how they currently practice their craft. While most participants simply stated that they “…had some pretty good teachers,” a few gave more detailed explanations during their interviews of what made the teachers good. Participants who had teachers that validated their learning, gave a connection to a practical use for the information, had a visible passion for the subject and teaching, allowed students to problem solve reported many of the same behavior when explaining their personal pedagogy. Participants who had subpar experiences with teachers espouse a philosophy opposite of the examples they provided. These negative aspects included chalk and talk lectures and low classroom engagement. Table 4 illustrates a few of the participants’ comments.
Table 4

*Illustrative quotes regarding the Theme: “Teachers’ experience as students has directly affected their theory and practice in the classroom.”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>He could be boring. He did the chalk and talk. But every once in a while he would draw that really strange little diagram. He would make formulas on things.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He used to do stuff like that to be able to show you, again, kind of cause and effect. Kind of take situations that certain people are in history and how did they make those decisions, what was their dilemma?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They had kind of fun, creative assignments which kind of made us think a little more deeply about ourselves and think more deeply about history and our country, and about the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I started to like teach current events too because it always was about application and applying it to something, something that was going on in the world.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It must be noted that an issue with definitions of terms appeared during the collection of this data. Two participants were able to conclude that they had a very good teacher, but unable to adequately define what made that specific teacher good. While one confused the meaning of fun with popular and engagement with focus, another participant’s best memories came from a teacher in another subject (Math).

One participant reported that history class was, “Boring. I didn’t like it. I had a 105 average, because we read out loud, and everybody had a different paragraph to read, and you answered the questions in the back of the book.” She was also quick to explain the characteristics that comprised the teacher who had an impact; passion, active, and entertaining.

The nature of the teachers’ influence to teach has a direct impact on their beliefs and vision of what good teaching looks like. All participants reported that the original reason for them entering the teaching profession most directly affected the way in which they thought about educating others. Most participants reported their influence coming from family members.
The nature of that inspiration was further divided along the lines of honor, service, and relationships. Table 5 explains these divisions using the words of the participants.

Table 5

*Illustrative quotes regarding the Theme: “The nature of the teachers’ influence to teach has a direct impact on their beliefs and vision of what good teaching looks like.”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Honor</th>
<th>“…my family’s history – the Ellis Island experience. The immigrant experience, the European history experience that we have.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“My family in Portugal was educated; they were all principals and teachers there too, so my Mom wanted to be a teacher. When she came here, she actually had to go to work when she was 16 and quit school. She didn’t get her GED until she was 33 years old. I think that made me value education a little bit more…”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Service                      | “It's my way to give back for the people that never gave up on me.” |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>“… I became a teacher because I had a second cousin who lived across the street from me… and also knowing that even though he’s not here, I can do it. If I can take one-tenth of what Johnny taught me and spread it around and get other people involved in it, then it excited me and so that’s why.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“So despite being an Episcopal priest, I grew up in a house full of history books. The most rewarding conversations I had with my father was attempting to have conversations about history.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two of the participants related less personal influences than the rest of the group that shepherded them into education. One expressed during an interview that, “I’m a history teacher because I didn’t like how I was taught in high school.” This required inclusion here due to its significant ability to influence. It was clear through the rest of the interview with this individual that he had some bad experiences and was therefore, determined to employ instructional strategies to gain the exact opposite results which he had experienced.
The least personal account explained that, “I wasn't sure that law was actually what I wanted to do, so ...” This small seemingly innocuous comment had noteworthy ties to the particular participant’s performance in the classroom. An influence on the direct opposite end of the spectrum explained that, “When I was in seventh grade my dad took me to Gettysburg to teach me. It sparked an interest in me.” That participant went on to explain how he strives to build that same type of rapport with his students.

Teacher’s current level of satisfaction with all aspects of their job affects their beliefs concerning the teaching of history. All of the participants responded that their level of satisfaction with their current position had a slow, but steady impact on their teaching. When pressed for details, participants cited multiple contributing factors that dampened the excitement and enjoyment of teaching. While some loathed the idea of being “second to a cell phone or a text” and other “modern distractions” others struggled with “the student who has been raised in an environment that does not value education in any way, shape or form.” There were multiple complaints about the constant workload of meetings, correcting, and planning, but this was easily attributable to what was described by many as “the grind.” In fact one individual combined the grind with another serious issue when he said, “I think at times the lack of professional feeling I have as a teacher, it’s more of a grind, I’m just trying to get through and I don’t always feel like a professional.”

During both the interviews and focus group, respondents also openly spoke to the pervasive, yet unspoken knowledge that “it is not a great time period for teachers” because they “have become a scapegoat for our problems in society, a punching bag for the public in general, and it’s pretty depressing to be a teacher going through this time period.” In general, participants reported that while they love their job, it is becoming increasingly difficult to perform the task of
teaching even before including the “parenting” and other administrative tasks they have to perform. The one area that all participants agreed on was that low morale is “never about teaching with the kids. Very rarely is there a day where I have a bad day at school, it ever has to do within the classroom with a kid.”

When one of the participants was pressed for details concerning the daily obstructions many spoke about that hurt his performance he replied, “It's not teaching history. It's the teaching profession itself.” This teacher specifically began to explain that they teach because they like “being in the classroom in front of the kids imparting knowledge.” There is a strong belief that something is lost when testing or other issues inhibit the ability to explore historical perspectives or historiography at a deep level.

Research Question #3: To what degree is there an alignment between these teachers’ stated beliefs about the teaching and learning of history and what is observed in their lesson plans and practice?

The data analyzed for this question was a combination of record review (lesson plans) and classroom observations. The researcher analyzed lesson plans that had been self-selected by participants. The plans along with the class being observed were supposed to be examples of the teachers’ belief system (as described in the interviews) in action. Once the lesson plan was analyzed, the class was observed for comparison with the aforementioned belief system.

Seven lesson plans in total were examined. The researcher examined them for structure, materials, and objectives. The three aspects were important when comparing the teachers’ beliefs to the implementation of any researched based practices. Specifically, the researcher was attempting to discern opportunities for, student engagement to increase internal mediation (Nancy & Marcy, 2002); a balanced practice of both conceptual (memory) and procedural
(disciplinary) knowledge (Lévesque, 2008; Carretero, 2010); and the time required to practice the work of historians. While not all teachers espoused the attainment or practice of the aforementioned strategies, many discussed some of them if not in the academic vernacular. Therefore, the researcher looked for the required materials and conveyance of the objectives to the students.

Throughout the observations only two teachers faithfully practiced their espoused theory. When they spoke of the importance of investigation, discovery and problem solving connected to students’ lives, it was observed in their classrooms. Of the remaining participants, three were mismatched in a negative fashion while one was positive. By way of explanation, the researcher considered the mismatch negative if the instructor used textbook jargon and complicated explanations of the proper instructional methods during the interview, but fell short of the descriptions in practice. Conversely, it was considered positive if the observation yielded data showing the teacher consistently outperformed the description given during the interview. In both cases, they were either unwilling or unable to fully articulate their own practice. Table 6 explains the main themes concerning the third research question.

Table 6

Themes in relationship to the question: To what degree is there an alignment between teachers stated beliefs about teaching history and what is observed in their lesson plans and practice?

- Teachers purposefully design their lessons loosely to give them an opportunity to adjust their teaching based upon a combination of the context of the class and what their experience tells them is successful.
- Adjustments to teaching practices are not made based on stated beliefs, but rather the perceptions of student ability, what constitutes a good class, and other outside influences.
Teachers purposefully design their lessons loosely to give them an opportunity to adjust their teaching based upon a combination of the context of the class and what their experience tells them is successful. The data from the interviews, lesson plans, observations, and focus group revealed that teachers are relying on their experience to create lessons based on what they see as effective teaching strategies. While they are not referring to the current research or literature to accomplish this, the teachers in this study happen to be in alignment. This appears to come from a combination of teachers’ beliefs concerning the purpose of history, their base reason for teaching the subject, and a current department initiative concerning a focus on Blooms Taxonomy. While many teachers initially had difficulty explaining the difference between historical knowledge and understanding, they all clearly explained the higher levels of Blooms Taxonomy. The researcher believes this is what allows for the unbeknownst attainment of research based, disciplinary practices. Three teachers were in agreement during the focus group when one said,

I don’t need a book or researcher to tell me how to teach. In fact, I’m not interested unless they teach. Its common sense concerning what works and what doesn’t. We all meet struggles with students. Only people that experience that know how to fix it and get kids to learn.

The fact that all of the participants’ lesson plans varied from vague to highly detailed in content and structure highlighted the differences in beliefs, but not years of experience. Years in the classroom had no bearing on the level of detail in the lessons. The two teachers with lesson plans that amounted to nothing more than a student agenda and assignment directions have been teaching for six and 12 years respectively and were also the individuals who practiced educational strategies in line with their theory of best practices. It is also significant that it was
in these two classes that students did the most work with primary sources that were distributed with the agenda and assignment sheet. This reinforced one of the teachers who said,

I give students when they come in, they’re going to get some sort of primary source. Say it's the Virginia Declaration of Rights. They’re going to read it first. We may read it in the sense that they could read it the night before, they could read an excerpt of it in class.

Both lesson plans also spanned more than one class period which is further proof of what one teacher meant when they said, “there is usually a series of activities that we’re doing, sometimes in an hour process of two or three. One leads into the next, and I’m kind of facilitating the students through that.” In essence the teachers worked from the same plan that was given to students. While it covers the various topics and activities, it does not list how the teacher will proceed. When questioned about this, they replied that while they keep the objective in their head, it allows them to adjust to the students by not being tied to a prewritten lesson. This concern became reality in another teacher’s class.

One of the participants gave me a very detailed plan complete with state and literacy standards, accommodations, and materials needed. This lesson also contained a step by step explanation of how the lesson would unfold. It had strong activities that are grounded in current research as well as explanations of why the teacher was proceeding in such a fashion. Unfortunately, as the lesson progressed, time and the strict structure became an issue. Even as class time and student interest diminished, the teacher was loathe to leave the confines of the plan. Eventually, as the students became more unruly and it was clear the conclusion of the lesson would not be attained, the teacher adjusted the instruction, but did so in a less than favorable manner. Instead of manipulating the order of events or number of objectives, the
teacher began to give students answers, and push them through the process of the lesson which resulted in fewer questions and less interaction with the material.

The remaining lessons contained more of the traditional aspects of a plan, but remained somewhat vague. When questioned about why they were written that way, one teacher responded, “…because you never know what you’re going to get.” This teacher was referring to the disposition of the students and supported by another teacher who said, “the students should know what they are doing, but not necessarily where they are going.” The researcher made certain to question all the teachers about the reasoning behind their lesson plans and received two distinct answers that, in his opinion, sum up the teachers who participated in this study attitude. The first said,

The foundations for teaching are the foundations for teaching. It doesn’t matter if you learned how to teach 20 years ago or if you learned two months ago. There’s certain things that have to be done as a teacher and then you develop your style to make it more personal not personally comfortable for the students, personally comfortable for you so that you get the message across the right way. So I plan accordingly.

Picking up on the implied aspect of a lack of or loose planning, the second responded, Sometimes some parts of a lesson or some days, is strict kind of lecturing in a sense. I do it differently, active lecturing, question, response, try to have them help me answer certain questions about things and I have them read ahead of time it takes that sort. Then there’s other types of things you have and do to apply some of that basic knowledge that they’re going to facilitate. It all depends on the students and where they are. I have to change or they will tune out.
Adjustments to teaching practices were or were not made based on stated beliefs, but rather the perceptions of student ability, what constitutes a good class, and other outside influences. The areas that affected the most changes to current lesson plans concerned classroom management, time, and perceived student understanding. Tables 7 - 11 provide five instances where these changes or were not by juxtaposing various interview and focus group statements with actual classroom observations. The tables are designed to highlight a comment, give the purpose of the lesson at that point, and then explain what occurred in the classroom. The researcher has included instances that illustrate both teachers who adjusted according to need as well as those who did not.

While a brief description was given in concert with the finding above, further discussion concerning the possibly more personal reasons behind the decisions teachers made will also be beneficial. There were instances during which teachers either ignored or missed student body language or overt signs of disengagement. Varying levels of classroom management and respect from students were also observed by the researcher. This in turn caused reactions from teachers that may have been different depending on the perceived level of respect the students had for them at the time. An explanation accompanies each table. This explanation attempts to highlight the fact that teachers must read multiple cues concerning time and student behavior before altering how their lessons unfold.

**Example 1, Table 7.** While this table represents what appears to be a small portion (12 minutes total) of the class, in actuality it is (19%) of the time spent with the teacher. Three things are clear from this observation when considered within the overall context of the class. First, the teacher was practicing something contradictory to the beliefs expressed during the interview process. Second, students struggled with the procedure of how to craft generate
effective interview questions. This was evidenced by students waiting for the teacher’s approval or disapproval before writing any questions. Third, the procedural work is being done for rather than being taught to students. This occurred at various points during the class further illustrating that there was not a lot of teaching and learning about the process of or how to study history. While there was a transfer of facts and some common connections being made, it was mostly generated by the teacher.

Table 7

Illustration and explanation of the quote: “I don't like to get in too much and give my opinion because I want to listen to what they're saying because I think that's important to let them and wait until they're going to share with the class, but I like to listen to what they're saying.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose (observation)</th>
<th>Help students craft effective interview questions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Action (observation)** | • The teacher spoke with students for a few moments about how they may want to craft questions by using 4 individual student examples to illustrate good and bad. There was very little if any explanation beyond ‘that is a bad question” or “good”. (2 Minutes)  
• The teacher then wrote a set of prepared questions on the overhead. Students quickly jotted down what they were hearing. (10 Minutes) |

It is helpful to note that when asked about deciding when to make connections and give answers this teacher expressed that, “I think you have to determine if that particular student is going to be able to make the connection or be able to answer that question because I think some students will be able to and other students won’t, I think that’s very personalized for some particular student.” On the surface, this is sound reasoning, but in practice, the teacher was instructing the whole class rather than just an individual. This particular instructor also holds the belief that, “its going bad in my room is when I can't keep them calm.”
Example 2, Table 8. This is an example of a teacher’s comments during an interview matching their action during a lesson. During this portion of the lesson, the students were active and engaged in the process of defining terms that were relevant to the topic being studied. While the teacher did circulate through the room during the activity they did not offer any answers or clarification to the students. The usefulness of this strategy became apparent during the “formal definition” phase when after hearing a definition close to his, a student said, “Yeah, yours sounds more official, but I can remember mine.” This activity further illustrated the idea that there needs to be a combination of teacher and student led lessons. When approached at the end of the lesson, the teacher explained that, “I thought for a moment that I was going to have to get involved and help move them along with their definitions. Some looked as if they were confused, but I tried to wait and it worked out.”

Table 8

Illustration and explanation of the quote: “Things can’t be teacher led a lot and things can’t just be student-centered. You need to work together. You need to give them the skills that they need for them to practice it, and then for them to actually implement it and use it for the discussion.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose (observation)</th>
<th>Defining unit vocabulary words.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action (observation)</td>
<td>Students were shown a short (1.5 Minutes) video clip after their beginning review activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students were then given a list of vocabulary words and instructed to define them by using individual beliefs, notes from their review, and then verbal collective knowledge of the class. (7 Minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The teacher ended the process through a whole class sharing and the tweaking, correcting and sharing of the official definition. (5 Minutes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example 3, Table 9. While this portion of a class observation appears to contradict the concept concerning not being able to facilitate through a whole lesson, it takes place after a short
lecture was given the class before. Therefore, the highlighted aspect only includes facilitation. It is also important to note that this lesson was observed with two classes due to a large size difference (14 and 31) in the number of students. The teacher only adjusted the lesson concerning time and classroom management techniques.

Table 9

*Illustration and explanation of the quotes:* “I don’t think you can facilitate every single time, the idea that we’re supposed to model for them, but to model you have to teach them how to do it first and then you’re supposed to monitor it. I think you have to play with both roles for it to be effective.” and “I’m more of a skills person. It’s great if they learn about The Jungle and all the other stuff, that’s a cool thing to read, it’s very interesting to them, but if they can actually break it down and apply their whole idea of the purpose behind it…”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose (observation)</th>
<th>Analyzing political cartoons.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action (observation)</td>
<td>• The teacher provided/directed students to create a T chart that contained the word observation on its horizontal axis and three boxes on its vertical axis that read “phrases, words, people, actions, objects” in the first; “interpret” and “main idea” in the second; and “evaluate” and “connection” in the last.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The political cartoon was then displayed on a document camera. Students began to analyze the cartoon by filling in their T Chart. The teacher directed them to complete it in the order it presented itself by building their knowledge from simple to difficult concepts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The class then shared their perspectives moving from the concrete to the abstract in an effort to elicit more student participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The teacher closed the activity by walking through the cartoon to highlight the significant aspects and filling knowledge the students did not have.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The larger class took longer to move through the material and therefore did not complete an earlier portion of the lesson. However, they were able to reach a much deeper and richer explanation/understanding of the political cartoons in a shorter time frame due to the added size of the collective intellect. The researcher observed that the teacher addressed any off task students much quicker in the larger class as well. While the teacher used some sarcasm and
humor with the smaller class to move them along, it was clear that both classes were receiving the same material through a slightly adjusted method of delivery due to their numbers.

**Example 4, Table 10.** This table was included with very little detail to specifically illustrate the climate of the class. Students were moderately engaged during the interactive lecture. As the class continued, they became less interested and visibly disengaged. This teacher’s explanation of good teaching would be accepted by many, but the issue was his inability or unwillingness to register that the students were bored and change the lesson. Throughout the interview and focus group process, this teacher stressed the importance of “building personal relationships with students regardless of the acquisition of understanding.” It was clear to the researcher that on this occasion, the teacher was trying to address the topic in a fact reduced, sensationalist manner that would interest the students. When this was not successful, the move was made to a power point that gave only facts. Finally the class degenerated into a mode of instruction that was comfortable for the teacher, which created an atmosphere in direct contradiction to the given definition of good teaching.

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration and explanation of the quotes: “Good teaching is when you have that great lesson, but for whatever reason, the kid’s just not there with you. Then you make the decision to say “We’re going to stop right now. What’s the problem? You guys didn’t understand that? All right. Shut everything down. Here’s what we’re going to do...” To be able to see what’s going on there. Good teaching, you know when you’re making the connection. If I’m giving them just things that I know and I’m losing them, I could have the best lesson plan and the best practices and the best of everything but it’s just not happening right now. Stop and try to focus on it.” and “Good teaching is when you see kids respond to you.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose (observation)</th>
<th>• Understand “The Jungle” and its place in the Progressive Movement.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action (observation)</td>
<td>• The teacher gave an interactive lecture concerning the safety of food packaging by giving examples of the differences of current techniques with those of the early 20th Century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The teacher gave a power point lecture on some of Theodore Roosevelt’s policies as well as muckrakers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The read from Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Example 5, Table 11.** The significance of this lesson lies in the fact that it was observed with two separate levels of classes (honors and college). The teacher circulated as the game progressed, encouraged students to be deceitful, and changed the rules during both classes. There was also a period at the end of the class during which students debriefed the activity with the teacher. While most of the structure was the same, changes were made according to the students’ ability to understand various factors throughout the class. In essence, this teacher changed the method of delivery. These changes included: less sarcasm and more concrete language when attempting to get the students to cheat during the game, honors students led the debriefing activity while the college level students needed the teacher to lead, less repetition with the honors students, a heavier focus on the conceptual aspects of the lesson with the college level class, and more connections being explicitly made by the teacher rather than discovered by the students with the college level class. It is important to note that while both classes were engaged in the activity, the teacher worked harder to attain that level with the college level class. This teacher rendered a perfect example of being aware of the students and adjusting to meet their needs. When asked about the adjustments at the end of class, the researcher was told, “often the students at the lower levels need more motivation…it’s tough, but if you make some connections and show them you care they come along…they’re good kids…”
Table 11

Illustration and explanation of the quotes: “I always like a class where I am more of a facilitator than a reciter. You know, reciting information to students. I don’t give a lot of notes, I have students – we work on how we go through a textbook, we work on how we go through primary sources, trying to get ideas from notes and secondary sources also. I like facilitating, or what I like to think is more of coach students.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose (observation)</th>
<th>Action (observation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Learn about Locke, Hobbes and the Nature of Man.</td>
<td>• The teacher gave students a quick review quiz that was mainly comprised of vocabulary terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The teacher reviewed what the students had accomplished last class when they attempted to set up a government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Students participated in a “Prisoner’s Dilemma” game for extra credit points to illustrate competition and the concept of selfishness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of the Findings

The findings from this study were compiled as a case study conducted with a high school history department in Southeastern Massachusetts and illustrates not only how teachers view the purpose of history as a subject and skill set, but also how and why (or not) they use what current research constitutes as the best strategies for teaching and learning history. The analysis of data from interviews, lesson plans, observations, and a focus group revealed that:

According to individual interviews, history teachers at this school believe:

• Knowledge of history is essential to the creation of a better human system, but are unclear on how to achieve that meaningful understanding.

According to individual interviews and the focus group:
• Teachers must move outside of their instructional comfort zone to get students to grow, but are only able to change certain aspects of their beliefs concerning education.

According to their lesson plans, classroom observations, and the focus group:

• Teachers plan for flexibility according to context, but are still overwhelmed by outside pressures and adjust their craft based upon experience and perception rather than theory.

In summary, the teachers who participated in this study through their comments and actions supported the concern that research addressing meaning-making and the teaching and learning of history has not fully made its way to classroom practice. Rather, teachers are employing strategies that they have become comfortable with based upon their influence to teach; experience in the classroom; demands placed on their time concerning testing and administrative tasks; and perception of their students current disposition towards the class and learning process.

Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

As the new Common Core standards for Massachusetts and their increased focus on literacy gradually take effect (Education, 2011), it becomes even more noticeable that the use of core disciplinary concepts and procedures in historical instruction at the secondary level is lacking or altogether absent (Yeager & Davis, 2005; Yilmaz, 2008; Carretero, 2010). When used, these concepts are designed to improve students’ ability to think historically by clarifying for both the student and teacher what it means to learn history well (Stearns, Seixas, et al., 2000). Such instruction allows students the opportunity to attain what VanSledright (2010) and other
historians recognize as the capacity and cognitive tools necessary to critically approach history rather than absorbing a fixed body of knowledge (Carretero, 2010; Lowenthal, 2000). The core concepts of historical significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, evidence, and historical empathy offered by Levesque (2008) provide a system of classification that contains strategies for such teaching and learning.

What current research constitutes as powerful teaching and learning within the discipline however, is not being successfully implemented. This is due to multiple reasons, but specifically a misunderstanding of what it means to learn history well is at issue. Unfortunately, issues of mandated testing, controlling student behaviors and covering standards keep even the best qualified history teachers from engaging their students in disciplinary historical thinking (Barton, 2003; Lévesque, 2008). While these are very real obstacles, the lack of understanding and implementation of the most effective teaching and learning strategies at the secondary level by teachers is the most detrimental.

History education should address students’ ability to critically assess not only themselves, but the complicated world in which they live, thereby allowing them to attain success no matter their post-secondary plans. Education has continued to fail in its promotion of historical thinking largely due to its reliance on the transmission of master narratives from textbooks (Hynd, 1999; Lévesque 2008). History teachers continue to teach their students a history that others have already written (National Research Council (U.S.). Committee on How People Learn A Targeted Report for Teachers., Donovan et al., 2005).
**Review of the Methodology**

This qualitative study examining secondary level history teachers’ knowledge and ability to implement what research constitutes as the powerful teaching and learning of history was designed to specifically address the three following questions:

1. How do history teachers in a largely middle class, suburban high school think about the teaching and learning of history?

2. What has shaped their beliefs and understanding of the teaching and learning of history as reported by them?

3. To what degree is there an alignment between these teachers’ stated beliefs about the teaching and learning of history and what is observed in their lesson plans and practice?

The researcher used a triangulation of Stake’s (2010), Creswell’s (2007), and Merriam’s (2009) separate definitions of qualitative research that emphasizes a search for understanding of complex phenomenon by studying a purposeful sample in a natural setting and explaining the findings through a rich and detailed inductive analysis that takes contextual nuances of the problem into account. However, the analysis and interpretation of the data required a heavier reliance on what Stake calls its four major aspects; interpretive, experiential, situational, and personal (2010). This required the collection of multiple types of data in a specific format. Interviews, record reviews, observations, and a focus group were held and then coded for recurring themes. Member checking occurred throughout the process in an effort to spiral the data back to the individual from whom it was collected to assure clarity and accuracy.

Individual interviews with the participants were held prior to observations of classes in an effort to not only assist in eliciting teachers’ perspectives of the contextual issues facing their
practice, but to also gain insight into their perspectives of what constitutes powerful teaching and learning of history. Lesson plans were also examined before observing the class in order to consider differences between the written and taught lesson. The observations fulfilled the role of explaining both context and similarities between teachers’ stated beliefs and practice. The final source of data came from a focus group which included all the teachers after observing all participants’ classes. Its purpose was to capture any more meaning produced as participant commented on patterns and themes discovered by the researcher in the rest of the data.

This chapter will be broken down into the following sections: presentation and discussion of the major findings, discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review, final analysis, significance of the study, limitations, conclusion, and future research.

Discussion of Major Findings

The analysis of the data gathered from the interviews, record review, observations, and focus group through the first and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009) produced multiple themes (as presented in Chapter 4) that support the following major findings:

1. The teachers in this history department believe that knowledge of history is essential to the creation of a better human system, but are unclear on how to achieve that meaningful understanding through the acquisition and application of skills.

2. The teachers in this history department stated that they must move outside of their instructional comfort zone to get students to grow, but are only able to change certain aspects of their beliefs concerning education.
3. The teachers in this history department plan for flexibility according to context, but are still overwhelmed by outside pressures and adjust their craft based upon experience and perception rather than theory.

The teachers in this history department believe that knowledge of history is essential to the creation of a better human system, but are unclear on how to achieve that meaningful understanding through the acquisition and application of skills. An analysis of the data concerning the first research question produced a multifaceted finding that encompassed what teachers consider to be the two main aspects of teaching and learning; methodology and relationships. While the specificity of the definition varied, all of the teachers who took part in this study were in agreement on a general purpose of the importance of history as a subject. They believe that history, as one teacher said, “encompasses all the skills and it encompasses all the disciplines. I see history as the discipline that ties everything together.” Oddly, they were not (as determined through the data) explicitly instructing students in those skills that are necessary to practice the procedural aspects of historical understanding that will help students realize the following goal subtly articulated by a teacher:

I think the purpose of history is to have an understanding of who we are. I really, really feel that we cannot have an understanding of who we are and the world around us without understanding historical connections. If you can’t make those connections about how things in your past affect you as an individual, you cannot have an understanding about how the present world that we are in is affected by historical developments, then I don’t think you have a very deep understanding of what in the world is going on around you or what in the world is going on in your life. I think to me it’s the greater understanding of who you are and the world around you – that’s the importance of history.
While most teachers had a clear conception of the purpose of history as well as successful instructional methods for the acquisition of the subject, many were unable to articulate the differences between learning and understanding as it pertains to the discipline of history rather than a generalization across all academic subjects. By way of explanation, it is clear that the participants had a strong working knowledge of higher order thinking skills as defined by Bloom’s Taxonomy. Conversely, they were not bridging the gap between this knowledge and what research shows as the skills necessary to practice the required procedural aspects to attain true historical understanding through the construction of larger conceptual narratives.

It was interesting that teachers with a graduate degree in the subject of history did not reference any of the methods regularly employed by historians and taught in most graduate programs. Each time they were asked a methodology question, teachers referred to general educational strategies. It is important to note that a building initiative concerning student acquisition of higher order thinking skills has and continues to be underway. The researcher believes that examining the teachers’ answers knowing this context sheds important light on this piece of data. Currently, the professional context in which the teachers exist is dictating how they think about teaching. While skilled at attaining the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy (which lend themselves to historical thinking), teachers at this school are not consistently using or teaching the disciplinary skills necessary for true historical understanding. This is occurring not due to a lack of ability or willingness on teachers’ part, but a lack of focus. A comparison in Table 12 for further understanding of the two skill sets has been included below.
Table 12

*A comparison of Bloom’s Taxonomy and Heuristics Employed by Historians*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bloom’s Taxonomy</th>
<th>Heuristics Employed by Historians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remembering</td>
<td>Investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying</td>
<td>Perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing</td>
<td>Sourcing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>Contextualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating</td>
<td>Corroboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While half of the teachers who participated in this study have begun to focus on specific heuristics used by historians, it was not taking place on a full time basis (at the time of this study). Therefore, the teachers were observed to have a heavy reliance on the existing narratives put forth in textbooks. The teachers in this study believed that they were able to attain the students’ successful acquisition of skills such as analysis, synthesis, transfer, and creativity through the creation of a trusting environment that is engaging due to the implementation of lessons that students find personally relevant. As a result, some of the teachers were unable to articulate the differences between learning and understanding as it pertains to the discipline of history rather than a generalization across all academic subjects. This has resulted in a more generalized approach than the explicit instruction in the procedural heuristics used by historians.

The teachers in this history department stated that they must move outside of their instructional comfort zone to get students to grow, but are only able to change certain aspects of their beliefs concerning education. All of the teachers who took part in this study vocalized on some level the need to challenge their own beliefs to get all students engaged. This
emerged through the expression of “comfort zone” when trying to explain why they act or teach in a certain manner. One teacher expressed this in a positive fashion by saying:

“For me, like I’ve said, we can talk negatively and positively about the changes; it’s made me a better teacher. I know I can improve a lot more but there is a comfort zone that we all have each one of us and it is difficult sometimes to go outside that comfort zone.”

Another teacher made it clear that they were intent on staying in their personal comfort zone regardless of the student through the following statement:

The foundations for teaching are the foundations for teaching. It doesn’t matter if you learned how to teach 20 years ago or if you learned two months ago. There’s certain things that have to be done as a teacher and then you develop your style to make it more personal not personally comfortable for the students, personally comfortable for you so that you get the message across the right way.

This participant also highlighted the second aspect of this finding concerning teachers innate or learned ability to change their instruction to increase understanding. The forces that shape teachers beliefs and understanding concerning the teaching and learning of history have and continue to do so in two distinct manners which the researcher has labeled “core” and “variable” for ease of explanation.

With the exception of one, all the participants in the study related that they began teaching due to a very direct influence in their life. That is what this researcher considered their core (or base belief) reason for teaching. Whatever the impetus, it was so powerful and attached to them that it does not change. It comprises the teacher’s belief of what teaching and learning should be for everyone. Therefore, it is a key component of their belief system. One teacher
hinted at a base understanding of this during the focus group by younger teachers when they said, “…for me, that works they start thinking about those things but also when you’re a first year teacher or whatever you’re very rigid and you’re trying, I think to know where the comfort zone comes from and stay with it, for me anyway.” The other participating teachers agreed to this, but two paused and added, “we should keep thinking like that after we have been teaching.”

The variable aspect (or the understanding that the teachers have come to) is a derivative of multiple influences on their career. These include, but are not limited to public perception, social expectations, and administrative tasks and responsibilities. It must be noted that, due to their fluid nature based upon both legislative and societal issues, teachers’ understanding of learning changes over time. Due to the fact that it has been formed by rapidly changing influences, the teachers more readily change this facet of their beliefs and practice. They never hold new initiatives or mandates sacred. This is where they are able to adjust their classroom strategies to incorporate a diverse student population into the educational process.

Teachers in this history department stated that they plan for flexibility according to context, but are still overwhelmed by outside pressures and adjust their craft based upon experience and perception rather than theory. After analyzing lesson plans in an effort to examine how teachers plan for the implementation of what they consider to be the best strategies for teaching for understanding and observing the corresponding classes, this researcher found that there is a widespread difference between how teachers view themselves practicing their craft and their espoused belief system. While this is supported by the themes that emerged from the data (as represented in Chapter Four) collected through the comparison of lesson plans, observations, and interviews there must be more explanation concerning the process. Teachers volunteered lessons that were meant to be an example of their theory in practice. After the
researcher analyzed the lesson, it was observed. This finding is important for three main reasons. First, teachers are not readily aware of the difference between their espoused theory and practice. Second, the difference is, at times, related to a misunderstanding concerning the definitions of various classroom dispositions (fun, engaging, focused, et.). An example of this is that one teacher has confused from where the students should be deriving engagement and fun. In this case, the source was focused on enjoying the class rather than the subject. In an effort to realize this belief, instruction was changed and learning opportunities were lost. Finally, the instructors who consistently fell below the expectations of their espoused theory did so for reasons stemming from deeper personal issues.

While addressing the issue of a flexible lesson plan for the purpose of adjusting instruction as needed, one teacher informed the focus group that:

We try them and sometimes, no, that didn’t really work or you know what, this is really good, or we take elements of things from different lessons that people teach. Then it fits an overall style but at the same time I think a lot of us too have a teaching style but we also have to look at our students; what type of classes that we have. Sometimes those styles might not fit the class that you’re teaching or the group of kids. I think this is a microcosm of historians in general.

What is absent in those words is four other teachers shaking their heads in disagreement and an explanation of how intertwined the teacher’s “style” is with the decision making process that results in an altered lesson. For example, there were multiple instances that allowed the researcher to observe the same lesson in varying contexts. The researcher and participant deemed this valuable when the differences pertained to class size or academic level of the students. Changes to the lesson that occurred did not vary from class to class. When asked
questions pertaining to pacing and instructing rather than facilitating after each different class, teachers responded, “They just need more concrete explanation and repetitiveness to understand.” and “I can facilitate more with larger numbers in the class because they feed off of each other…they arrive at concepts and answers on their own…by listening to each other.” respectively. These teachers made instructionally based decisions grounded in a combination of their personal experience and perception concerning the needs of the class to access the information rather than spontaneous feeling.

Discussion of Findings in relation to the Theoretical Framework

This study was informed through the theoretical lens of constructivism as defined by Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory, Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory, and Dewey’s Pragmatism. Inquiry and problem based learning theories also served as a perspective through which the beliefs and actions of history teachers could be viewed. These connections will be discussed below beginning with an explanation of the salient components of constructivism considered for this study. The more narrow theories of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Dewey will then be discussed. Finally, an explanation of inquiry and problem based learning will be presented.

Constructivism. The theoretical framework of constructivism rests on the belief that all learning and knowledge is constructed by individuals based upon their perception, prior knowledge, and context in which it is presented. Therefore, learning is an active process that is subject to an individual’s perception of an objective reality that has been created by their own mental representations (Knowledgebase, 2010). Due to the enormity of this framework as a whole, this researcher approached its explanation by focusing on what was considered to be the three main components for this study. They are: the notion of a unique created reality, the idea that this type of learning takes time; and that it is an active process.
**Unique created reality.** For the purposes of this study, as explained in Chapter One, Constructivism is more narrowly defined as meaning that as students, we each create a unique reality that is only in the mind of the knower (Cronjé, 2006). This held true for the participants and how they viewed their classroom strategies as opposed to their actions. During the interviews and focus group, teachers explained their belief system, acted differently in many cases, and then justified the difference for themselves rather than the researcher. By way of example, a teacher who professed that good teaching is when;

“a kid that can’t get to you fast enough to tell you what he wants to tell you. He’s coming out of his chair. It’s the other kids; you’ll see smiles on their face. You’ll see them hanging on every word you say.

When it was brought to his attention that he had the students sitting in their chairs reading paragraphs, he justified this action by saying;

“what works is, even when we went to reading, that active reading and that’s something that I learned through my department was that, I made a conscious effort not to stand up during that because there’s a reason why.”

Most teachers displayed the fact that the reality of what occurs in their classroom is a combination of the actual and the self-perceived.

**Learning takes time.** While constructivism is increasingly influential in teacher’s classroom practice it is problematic to implement for two main reasons. First, teaching and learning with this method takes time. The teachers who took part in this study gave the issue “lack of time due to administrative requirements and testing” as the major roadblock they face. Several comments shared in the focus group confirmed this as the participants said; “I do hear the clock ticking in my head and I find myself sometimes a little less willing to make those
adjustments that I should, in part because of that pressure to be up to a certain point for these common assessments.” and “I have a plan that I had to get to because of the time constraint. This is where we have to be according to framework, to advance and all the other stuff.”

Secondly, constructivist theory is based upon an internal learning process rather than teaching practices (Cronjé, 2006). Most telling of the lack of implementation of constructivist learning strategies was, “I would love to be able to help facilitate everything they’re doing but personally I don’t know how I’m going to get that time and for it to be effective that they’re going to learn what they need to learn.” The teachers were clearly concerned with students’ ability to internalize the required knowledge in the prescribed amount of time.

*Active process of learning.* The practice of constructivism not only supports, but requires that instructors allow learners to create meaning from what they are exposed to by analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting multiple pieces of data. This concept is vital due to the fact that the “doing” of history calls for a rejection of textbooks as an unquestionable set of truths rather than a tool to aid in understanding. The teachers who participated in this study have all begun to move away from textbooks in favor of primary resources. In fact three of the teachers use the Socratic Seminar as a main component of their classes. Students were given multiple documents to analyze and synthesize in an effort to build a plausible narrative in these classes. They are then assessed on their understanding rather than basic facts. While this practice was explained to the researcher during an interview by one teacher as;

“first, they’re engaged and they’re interested in it. The types of products that you’re asking them to… giving them the choice to produce, they’re choosing meaningful products and they’re actually putting good work into it. Also, in different assessments
you're finding that they're understanding those higher concepts in the questions, that they’re getting deeper meaning out of it.

The same teacher explained this process and their expectations to the students during class by saying, “I’m not really for giving you something that’s been watered down, and interpreted by other people... That’s not cool. I want you to deal with the real document on your own.”

Unbeknownst to the teachers practicing these strategies, they are highlighting the difference between internally and externally mediated realities (Cronjé, 2006). Students must be given guidance in their own personal, active construction of knowledge if understanding is to be authentic. By moving to essential questions and the creation of understanding by a distancing from the traditional textbooks, these teachers are creating an environment that engages students (internal mediation) with the topic rather than leaving them on the outside as passive observers (Nancy & Marcy, 2002).

**Vygotsky: Social development theory.** Vygotsky’s theory promoted the creation of contexts for the purpose of achieving that goal. It requires the teacher to facilitate learning by collaborating with students (Knowledgebase, 2010) as they progress from the dependent to independent zone in their development (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Additionally, to achieve this in a classroom, students must be introduced to both the purpose and process of building their own knowledge to motivate and engage them (Prince & Felder, 2007). While some teachers accomplished this by being cognizant of the “balance of tension” required to move students to independent understanding, fully half were incapable due to a lack of explanation. By way of example, one of the participants had their students analyze political cartoons concerning late 19th century immigration with two separate classes. This teacher explained to both classes the
process and reasoning behind what they were doing. The class with 15 more students analyzed the cartoons on a deeper level with less facilitation by the teacher. Conversely, another teacher attempted the same exercise with current food products in an attempt to make a connection with the impact of Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle”. There was no explanation and therefore, the students experienced nothing more than a passing interest of the number of insect parts allowed in modern day canned goods.

The first classroom allowed for a consequential, in-depth contextual discussion while the second one did not. The fact that social interaction in a learning context reinforces the idea that “Intelligence is not what you know but what you can learn with help” (Miller, 2009, p. 219) became even more apparent. Such discussions in various classrooms repeatedly proved that the students unknowingly act as a learning community that supports the “stretching” of their abilities. The explanation of this process through instruction becomes critical to address and possibly correct the issue that students operate under a construct of a fragmented academic self.

**Piaget: Cognitive development theory.** Class and even subject collaboration is especially important while the mental acts of Piaget’s assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium are occurring with students (Miller, 2009) if a larger, connected picture of understanding is to be fostered. This specific theory falls under constructivism for its support of the idea that understanding comes not from receiving, but constructing knowledge once it is rectified (assimilated) on a personal level in conjunction with one’s own beliefs. While all of the teachers who participated in this study professed this theory, the researcher only witnessed one put it in practice. The teacher taught two classes the same lesson concerning Hobbs’ versus Locke’s theories of man in government. While they had the students both play the “Prisoner’s
Dilema” game, the process was altered for the lower level class. Table 13 below illustrates the differences.

Table 13
A comparison of lessons between a College and Honors level class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Level</th>
<th>Honors Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prisoner’s Dilemma played</strong></td>
<td><strong>Prisoner’s Dilemma played</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High level of concrete directions and guidance given throughout the game.</td>
<td>• Low level of direction and guidance given throughout the game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Low level of sarcasm used due to lack of understanding/reaction.</td>
<td>• High level of sarcasm to “goad” the players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debrief</strong></td>
<td><strong>Debrief</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher debriefed with a detailed explanation about trust winners, losers, etc. he added what they learned about human nature and is debriefed so he actually made concrete connections.</td>
<td>• Students explained their strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher repeated essential questions.</td>
<td>• Students made connections to prior knowledge concerning Locke.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students explained how the game made them feel.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students went back to review prior night’s reading.</td>
<td>• Read two articles about Hobbs and come to an explanation concerning human nature and its role in government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students were assigned to read a general overview/comparison of the two view of human nature.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students benefited from more explicit instruction concerning procedure.</td>
<td>• Students involved in the procedural aspects of learning history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Context was difficult to establish.</td>
<td>• Teacher emphasized the conceptual aspects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher focused on conceptual rather than procedural aspects.</td>
<td>• Students synthesized multiple endpoints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher was focused on how to excite students by making the lesson tied to real life/relevant situations.</td>
<td>• Students approached the objectives the lesson through procedural methods and grasped the conceptual aspect of governmental foundations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There was major scaffolding present.</td>
<td>• Students discovered Hobbs and Locke and connected to government as they know it today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students made few connections without prompting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The adjustments the teacher made to the lesson not only addressed the role played by a student’s prior knowledge, but the perception of their ability as well. Piaget’s cognitive development theories also inform the implementation of constructivist strategies by offering guidelines by way of specific cognitive stages. These stages, while offering insights to teachers as to what level of knowledge students’ are capable of understanding, may also hinder the ability to practice research based instructional strategies with certain populations of students. In short, they inform the instructor, based on perception, as to the amount of aid expected and needed.

Dewey: Pragmatism. Most participants were in agreement with Dewey’s belief that knowledge must be useful to promote understanding and that all developmental stages (cognitive and social) are progressed through by the individual’s construction of knowledge and understanding according to both their context and value in application. When asked by the researcher, teachers agreed that student success is not just a matter of nature versus nurture, but nature times nurture (Shenk, 2010). All the participants agreed that their classrooms and students are different every day and therefore they must adjust to the context. When asked about “best practices” during the focus group, all the participants agreed with each other when one said, “There is no such thing.” It is clear that teacher struggle not only with the issue of what type of strategies help students learn best, but also with the personal and school context with which students enter their class. Through all aspects of data collection, this study proves Davis’ belief that it is not the implementation or existence of “best practices,” but “wise strategies” (Yeager & Davis, 2005).

One teacher specifically addressed this issue of usefulness when confronting varying contexts when they said;
“We can learn from these people and the decisions they made, regardless of the time period, because it's applicable to them. We’re all human beings. I really try to humanize it and really bring it down to a level of what was this person thinking and why, and try to apply it to today. How I'm talking about why we need to learn history and how you teach history, but then when you walk outside the classroom that whole paradigm doesn’t exist. It exists, but not in an institutional framework.”

Every teacher in the study nodded in agreement during the focus group when it was exclaimed, “look, they need to see how it applies to them…how they can use it…before they care.” These statements highlighted the fact that learning is not the passive acceptance of knowledge that exists out there, but requires the learner to engage the world (Prince & Felder, 2007) by using and manipulating information in authentic situations (Nancy & Marcy, 2002).

**Inquiry and Problem Based Learning.** While all teachers agreed that inquiry and problem based learning is important because it mirrors the real world that does not remain conveniently constant (Johann van der & Julia, 2011), they were split on the size of the role it should play in their instruction. This difference appeared to follow applied instructional methods. Teachers who emphasized procedural methods supported an increased amount of inquiry based instruction because it has been proven to be more effective in the development of thinking skills than traditional instruction. These teachers expect students to ask questions, uncover and connect facts, and draw conclusions using the concepts mentioned in Chapter Two (historical significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, evidence, and historical empathy) to construct knowledge.

These same teachers also supported a subtle yet increased amount of problem based learning due to a belief that history needs to be questioned through the examination of primary
resources. It was their belief that this type of learning assists in connecting problems of the past with today through a reexamination of facts. It also allows teachers to take the role of facilitator as students take the lead by defining the problem, taking stock of what they know and what they need to learn, and then proceed to learn it (Richard & Michael, 2011). It is important to note that the teachers involved in this study were able to articulate the type of instruction, but not the accepted terminology. Therefore the researcher used the specific language and made sure the teachers understood before applying any labels to what they were expressing in an effort to retain accuracy of interpretation.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

The literature review presented in Chapter Two of this study examined the following multiple themes: historical understanding, concepts, and classroom practices; knowledge construction and inquiry; and wise practices, meaning making, and assessment. Their main goal was to address the attainment, understanding and assessment of historical knowledge through a constructivist lens.

**Historical understanding.** Current research holds that the most important aspect of historical knowledge for both teachers and students is understanding the procedural rather than conceptual aspect of creation. Therefore, it is important to focus upon a widely accepted set of heuristics by which a person’s ability to think historically may be measured. This study supports this in theory, but only half of the participants practiced it in the classroom on a daily basis. While most teachers agree with Barton, who stresses that the most important aspect of learning and teaching history for both students and teachers is knowing "how" history is constructed (2003) and Hynd, who insists that knowledge is in a constant state of construction subject to a truth that is known by social influences and the balance of power at the time it was created is key
to unlocking the process with which historical knowledge is created (Hynd, 1999), most still relied on the stagnant set narratives as presented in most textbooks. This contradicts Duckworth’s belief that students are only able to pay attention to new theories if they contradict current ones possessed. This forces them to devise a new theory that incorporates the old one while assimilating the new (2006). In essence, a theory is necessary if understanding is going to be achieved.

**Classroom practices.** Peter Seixas lays out three prominent methods for historical instruction. First, teachers could “enhance collective memory by telling the best story and ignoring methods of inquiry. Second, teachers should present history as two sides in a debate through the use of multiple documents and sources. Third, have students address the merits of multiple perspectives and then relate the versions of the past to their political usefulness in the present (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000). All but two of the teachers who participated in this study fell into all three categories above. Additionally, Hynd (1999) posits that “Thinking critically about history is akin to thinking critically about the present” (p. 431), but accomplishing this as a professional, much less in classrooms requires three main elements concerning the construction of historical understanding: a method by which to practice its construction, a set of heuristics (agreed upon by historians), and criteria for the evaluation of the interpretation created (Burenheide, 2007). The results of this study show that the teachers who participated believe there must be a connection to the present and that history as a discipline offers students the skills to successfully navigate life after school. Conversely, this belief did not materialize in half of the classrooms where they were observed. Teachers expressed difficulty explaining specific, consistently used heuristics or methods of assessment beyond school wide rubrics and Bloom’s Taxonomy.
Concepts. This study illuminated the fact that at least half of the teachers who participated are focusing on the official narratives of history (conceptual) without developing an understanding of how (procedural) those narratives have been created. The practice of which supports the conflict that Pierre Nora terms “memory-history versus disciplinary history” (as cited in Lévesque, 2008), but directly contradicts Drake’s (2003) conclusion that because history is the product of the historian’s interrogation of primary resources, the discipline itself must insist on meaning over memory. This practice greatly affects the instructional pedagogy of the teachers who participated in this study because it leads to an uncritical look at knowledge for the sake of memorization rather than understanding. In essence, some are hindering students’ ability to construct meaningful knowledge and connect broader concepts without the ability to adjust their practices. Specifically, according to Duckworth (2006), this method of instruction does not call or allow for the level of acquisition required to test a student’s mental equilibrium to occur resulting in a lack of assimilation (Duckworth, 2006). While all participants in this study professed a realization that historical knowledge is a combination of both concepts and procedures that rely upon the development of each to improve a person’s ability in either, only half practiced instructional strategies through which it is accomplished.

Knowledge construction. Student construction of knowledge is and needs to be treated as an ongoing process that adjusts to multiple personal and academic experiences. The results of this study show that teachers struggle with the conceptual framework bias (Yilmaz, 2008) on both a student and personal level. While the participants understood that historical knowledge is constructed by humans and therefore, should be treated as an ongoing discussion, there was a lack of recognition concerning the influence of differing interpretations as both they and the students took varied perspectives on the subject. Even the teachers who focused on the
procedural aspects of instruction did not explicitly address this issue with students. Rather they relied on the students understanding and use of skills to accomplish the construction of an accurate representation of a plausible story based upon the connection of multiple historical facts that at first appear to be disconnected. It appeared to be understood that if students could detect bias in sources, they could detect their own. While this could possibly occur in a pragmatic sense through an activity akin to reflective practice, there is typically not enough time in class or enthusiasm outside of school to do so.

**Inquiry.** Inquiry based learning fosters understanding specifically due to its emphasis on students posing theories, investigating, synthesizing, and adjusting their understanding accordingly. In addition, the guidance required during this process by either the instructor or peers is shown increase the level of students’ engagement by making them active instead of passive participants in the topic (Nancy & Marcy, 2002). Approximately half of the teachers in this study attempted to practice inquiry based instruction on a small scale. There proved to be difficulty due to the fact that they had to instruct students how to narrow their focus before expanding to larger theories. While it appears to be counter intuitive moving from small details to larger concepts, it appeared to have a positive effect on students’ ability to both gain conceptual understandings and apply knowledge to new constructs. Therefore, inquiry based instructional strategies address the broader problem of practice stated in this study by focusing on analysis, synthesis, contextualization of information, and application of knowledge.

**Wise practices.** Wise teaching is just that because “it is not generalizable across students in class groups of different schools and in different circumstances. Wise practice attends to particularities” (Yeager & Davis, 2005, p. viii). Peter Seixas supports this as well. He believes the importance of attention to individualized, current situations is important due to the fact that
teachers and students must understand that “today’s methods for establishing truth are no more than today’s methods” (2000, p. 34) It is clear that there is no overwhelming set of best practices. History tends to be shrouded in “obscurity and disbelief” (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000, p. 65). This study supports these statements as all the participants vehemently insisted that “best practices” do not exist. Teachers enumerated multiple issues that altered the context of their class from student to student, class to class, and day to day. Multiple observations and record reviews support the fact that the teachers altered their lesson plans, based upon unforeseen circumstances every time they used them. Therefore, the ability of teachers to practice their craft wisely needs to be the aim (Yeager & Davis, 2005).

**Meaning making.** Students’ appropriation of history will increase if they are the individuals who construct the narrative. This belief will grow into an understanding that may be loosely measured through higher level questions connecting the relevance to their present lives. Mastery versus appropriation fits well with the theory of history versus heritage advanced by David Lowenthal (Lévesque, 2008) and Nora’s memory versus disciplinary history (Lévesque, 2008). Additionally, the constructivist belief that knowledge must be created by the individual based upon reconciliation with their own prior beliefs and upon reflection, the emergence of new understandings favors appropriation rather than mastery alone. This study both contradicts and complicates this aspect of the literature.

While the teachers in this study express a desire for students to believe or understand the topics students are studying, they are realistic when confronted with assessments that call for mastery. The department as a whole is moving towards assessments that call for a deeper understanding of the subject, but are confronted with the reality that their instruction is not fostering the disciplinary learning required. Therefore, they are still confronted with students
who learn until the next assessment rather than building a foundation of knowledge from which to broaden their understanding. This issue is currently being compounded by the disappearance of any formal, required testing. In fact, the conceptual aspect of history as an assessed subject is disappearing while the procedural skills learned are becoming a premium for their value in promoting literacy.

Assessment. Based upon the individualized nature of cognitive development, there is no one right way to understand a topic. In fact, historical knowledge is much more than a collection of small one sided facts, but rather a synthesis of many different perspectives and “right ways” based upon current circumstances. By both providing and requiring primary resources to be used in instruction, historical understanding may be assessed loosely through higher level questioning that connects the relevance of that history to students’ lives. This study complicates this aspect of the literature due to the fact that teachers are still basing their assessments and instruction on Blooms Taxonomy rather than an acceptable set of historian’s heuristics. Morton makes the point that historical instruction of this new critical type takes time, devotion and training on the part of the instructors (Stearns, Seixas et al., 2000). To quote Lowenthal “to fathom history demands sustained effort, and to teach it calls for experience and judgment” (2000, p. 64). Key ideas and understandings take time to develop based upon the developmental level of students (Bruner, 1971). In short, teachers in this study currently consider students to have an understanding if they are able to transfer concepts with no regard to the procedural aspects of the discipline.

Summary. Overall, the findings of this study connected to the literature review for this study in multiple ways, but may be narrowed for clarity. While there are some aspects of this study that have both confirmed and contradicted the literature, many of the findings complicate
what was examined. When addressing the historical understanding, concepts, and classroom practices aspect of the literature it was found that while participants in this study professed a realization that all historical knowledge is constructed by humans and therefore an ongoing debate conducted through an understanding of a combination of both concepts and procedures; there continued to be a lack of recognition concerning the influence of differing interpretations when dealing with the students. In fact, clearly half of the teachers in this study rely heavily on textbooks for assignments and homework. This lack of recognition was connected to the issue that teachers gave little time for or guidance during any inquiry based instruction. Rather, instructors expected students to detect bias in not only sources, but on their own with little guidance.

It is important to note that while teachers who participated in this study did express a desire for students to believe or understand the topics students are studying and attempted to practice their craft wisely, they are realistic when confronted with assessments that call for mastery. This creates an issue due to the fact that while the department as a whole is moving towards more procedurally based assessments, their instruction is not fostering the disciplinary learning required. This is the result of an overemphasis on Bloom’s Taxonomy rather than an acceptable set of historian’s heuristics at a time when procedural skills rather than conceptual are becoming a greater value based upon new literacy initiatives.

**Final Analysis**

The research presented here attempts to gain a better understanding of why history teachers at the small suburban high school that was the subject of this study do not consistently implement the best instructional practices identified by research for increasing historical
understanding. This issue was analyzed through a qualitative study that focused on the following three questions:

1. How do history teachers in a largely middle class, suburban high school think about the teaching and learning of history?

2. What has shaped their beliefs and understanding of the teaching and learning of history as reported by them?

3. To what degree is there an alignment between these teachers’ stated beliefs about the teaching and learning of history and what is observed in their lesson plans and practice?

Data for these questions was collected through a series of individual interviews with the teachers, a review of lesson plans, classroom observations, and a final focus group. In vivo coding was then used to understand and interpret the data (Saldaña, 2009).

The results of this study show that while the participants share the same basic belief as to the purpose of learning and understanding history, these beliefs come from different experiences that directly affect the practicing of their craft. It is through these personal perspectives that the participants construct an understanding and justification of their instructional practices when they are not in alignment with their espoused theories. Finally, the outside pressures associated with the profession create a sometimes overwhelming reality for the participants that affect the implementation of their plans and theories once in the classroom. In essence, clearly half of the participants involved in this study do not consistently implement research based instructional strategies for multiple reasons that are so unique to the individual and nuanced that there is no simple fix.
Significance of Study

History as a subject in high school faces a threat of being moved into the background and therefore neglected as an important aspect of creating critical, thoughtful, and well-reasoned citizens. While there is a strong debate concerning whether to teach the subject conceptually or procedurally, in a memory or disciplinary fashion, or for appropriation or mastery among the theorists and researchers, it is clear that a majority of teachers are not conveying the notion of what historical knowledge and understanding is to students through their practice. This lack of transfer has highlighted that teachers need to adjust and take advantage of the changes occurring in education due to the common core curriculum. These new curriculum mandates afford history teachers the opportunity to focus on the how rather than the what of the subject. This conceptual “watering down” of the discipline grants instructors the opportunity to exploit the one aspect that will keep it in the forefront; its ability to instruct students how to analyze, synthesize, detect bias in non-fiction texts, and transfer knowledge to varied constructs. Simply put, students will become more literate if they are instructed in the skills of a historian.

This study was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of a small suburban high school history department’s thoughts and beliefs concerning historical instruction. Specifically, it was designed to discover how individual teachers thought about the purpose of history, the source of those beliefs, and how they impacted classroom instructional practices.

This study has shown through interviews, observations, and a focus group that how history is taught must evolve to mirror the continuously developing knowledge in the discipline. A major finding highlights the fact that many teachers do not realize how far they stray from their espoused theory when practicing their craft. They also display a lack of understanding that the Massachusetts Common Core Curriculum has granted an opportunity to increase the
procedural aspects of historical instruction. There is a call for more literacy to be taught through non-fiction texts. Teachers must realize this, move away from concerns of mandated assessments, move towards teaching for understanding, and assessing the procedural aspects of historical knowledge. This study has also illustrated the need for more focused, individualized, and ongoing professional development that addresses not only instructional practices, but also the personal belief systems of teachers. It has been made clear that the failure to support the teachers who took part in this study in this fashion may continue to produce the same results; teachers who: know and understand the purpose of history; want to properly educate students in the discipline for maximum meaning making; fall short accomplishing these tasks due to a lack of support in making sense of their perceptions concerning issues that block their path.

This study will be helpful to high school history teachers who are struggling with research based practices in their classroom and the districts attempting to support them. A major finding from this study revealed that there are outside pressures that affect the practice of teachers. While an in depth examination of these issues was not a focus here, there are general references concerning their impact and how to assist teachers in avoiding them. This study will also be helpful to districts as they implement the new Massachusetts Evaluation System. A key component of this system is reflecting on current practice and setting goals for improvement. The significant findings contained here illuminate the need for deeper reflection concerning the belief system that underlies teaching practices in the classroom.

**Limitations**

As with all qualitative research, the findings of this study will be difficult to generalize and any attempt to do so will depend on context and circumstances. This difficulty may increase due to the limited number of participants and specific demographics of the site. There is promise
to be found however in the composition of the department that was studied. They continuously collaborate with a network of other departments across Southeastern Massachusetts concerning curriculum and instruction. Hopefully, this connection may open other researchers and districts up to further investigation using the methodology and findings that are contextually applicable. Specifically, this study has shown that there is a shortfall between teachers’ theoretical understanding of research concerning the teaching and learning of history and its practical application due to a combination of personal and professional factors. Ideally, future studies will be conducted with larger populations making use of an increased number of observations and focus groups that span a longer time frame in an effort to address the question concerning the possibility of facilitating a change in practice among a greater percentage of teachers.

Validity

The researcher was careful to follow research based guidelines developed by multiple sources to increase the validity of this study. Specifically following the advice of Lincoln and Guba (1985) the researcher used measures of credibility and reliability by representing the multiple realities of the participants accurately. This was assessed through member checking and triangulation of data (Yin, 2009). The researcher also openly disclosed any bias throughout the process (Creswell, 2007). The researcher was also careful to maintain an ethical conduct (Merriam, 2009) that allowed his accumulated knowledge of the context to act as a strength so that the “…findings are a product of data plus what the researcher brings to the analysis” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 32). Finally, what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call “persistent observation” (p. 304) was performed in an effort to gain depth by increasing the chance to reflect, track the researcher’s analysis, and check with those who provided the data.
Conclusion

This qualitative study of six teachers in a history department at a suburban high school in New England has had complicated results that must be used to drive any efforts for the widespread dissemination and practice of research based instructional practices concerning the teaching and learning of history. The data has shown that there is a desire among teachers to use the best practices possible. The issue becomes their understanding of what those practices are and how to consistently implement them. Even more important than their level of awareness are both the professional and personal obstacles that slow their progress. Simply put, there is a need for personalized, reflective, and ongoing professional development that allows an opportunity for theories to be examined and piloted if they are to make their way into the classrooms. Finally, the teachers in this study all professed to benefit from their participation. Chief among their comments was the fact that it made them stop and think about what they believe and why concerning their practice and decision to teach.

Future Research

There is a vast amount of research explaining the best instructional theories and strategies for increasing historical understanding. While this is helpful and even essential to teachers, the literature does not account for the very real pressures teachers feel as they instruct students. Instead, faced with State Standards, mandated assessments, and pacing guides, overcrowded classes, behavioral issues, and administrative duties; many teachers view the possibility of implementing new strategies as daunting if not impossible. Therefore, future research must address not only if teachers are or are not consistently practicing new strategies, but why. This would hopefully address the varied personal and professional contexts that have a direct effect on teachers.
Currently, due to the adoption of the new Common Core State Standards, which have an increased focus on literacy, there is an opportunity to reconsider how teachers are thinking about the teaching of history. Unfortunately, most teachers who took part in this study see it more as another method of pushing history to the background rather than an opportunity. Therefore, future research needs to be conducted in three main areas. First, the possibility of merging high school history and English departments to concentrate on the procedural aspect of history in an effort to focus on literacy should be examined. Second, effective methods of significant, ongoing professional development to address teachers’ ability to match their espoused theory with that of their practice needs to be studied in multiple contexts to inform schools how to move forward in supporting their teachers. Finally, a broader study needs to be conducted concerning why teachers enter the profession, how that affects their performance, and how does that reason change (or not) over time in an effort to understand how to initiate lasting instructional reform that leads to successful learning and understanding of history.

**Personal Reflection**

Reflecting on this study, I thought it would be appropriate to add another piece of contextual information concerning its genesis and findings. First and foremost, I chose this specific topic for my study because of my deep affinity for the subject, which is accompanied by an understanding of its value to society. I am also a former history teacher who utilized predominantly constructivist methods. This stemmed from my own experience as a student. Having had many teachers who were content driven, I gravitated towards two individuals who had specific story lines that engaged me with the discipline. These factors coupled with a wanting to be back in the classroom, led to the further investigation around how and why students are being taught history.
Due to my interest in the importance of teaching history, I have been engaged and thoughtful about the latest research and educational literature on the need for teaching history to be more procedurally than conceptually focused. The decision was made to not focus on one or even a few teachers, but a department for the simple reason that the group operates as a whole when determining instructional policies. In essence, I wanted to observe how teachers in this history department were instructing students.

I initially entered into this study to ask and determine how teachers were incorporating more recent research based instructional strategies in their classrooms. I quickly discovered during the interviews that the teachers in this study were not keeping abreast of the latest research to inform their practices. Therefore, the aim of the study needed to be adjusted to examine: what teachers think about teaching history; why are they thinking that way; and how does that line up in their classrooms.

While the teachers who took part in this study had varied beliefs concerning the purpose of history and how their instruction should unfold in the classroom, it was clear that their experiences and the context of their classroom played a major role in their selection of instructional strategies. Observing this made me question what was really influencing teachers’ decisions. In doing so, I discovered that these influences could be broken into three major areas; personal, contextual, and professional.

Teachers in this study teach the way they do for specific personal reasons. All but one of them fell into one of the following three categories describing why they decided to teach: honor, service, and relationships. No matter which teachers are in, it continues to shape how they view the purpose of education. The other aspect shaping this viewpoint is their experience as a student. All the teachers could readily remember teachers who had made an impact in their lives.
The way teachers at this high school teach is also a result of their context. Specifically, they are responsible for the carrying out of school initiatives concerning higher order thinking and literacy. While teachers dutifully fulfill these requirements, they are not always aligned with current research in the field of history. More importantly, teaching in this context offers no incentive for teachers to examine the growing body of literature in this area. It is seen as more important to show a connection to Bloom’s Taxonomy or advances in literacy. The result is an inconsistent application of historical theory in the classroom.

The professional aspect of teachers’ jobs has a large impact on decisions they make in the classroom as well. Issues of mandated assessments and administrative requirements often prohibit teachers from adjusting their practice to align more with research. Instead, the teachers who took part in this study consistently think about pacing and how much the students are retaining for upcoming assessments. These various influences only give a glimpse into the multiple factors that affect teachers. The teaching witnessed during this study was not of poor quality. The majority of it observed was quite good. In fact, they are doing their best as they attempt to rectify their beliefs with their practice in the face of being overburdened with both extraneous tasks and important educational initiatives. Unfortunately, this often hinders their understanding and implementation of what research deems to be the most effective strategies for the teaching and learning of history.

In closing, this study has left me with a few major questions. There is a rapidly expanding body of knowledge concerning the teaching and learning of history of which teachers in this study are for the most part unaware. This lack of awareness is the result of many influences, but suffice it to say current research is not making its way into the classroom on a consistent basis. What does the fact that current research is not informing practice on a consistent
basis say about what needs to be done? Why is this phenomenon occurring when this research offers a clear blueprint for improving the teaching and learning of history? I believe that it is clear to move quality historical instruction forward, the issue of inconsistent understanding or application needs to be addressed.
References


Johann van der, M. and B. Julia (2011). From problem-solving paradigm to co-ontogenic drift:


Wertsch, J. V. (2000). Is it possible to teach beliefs, as well as knowledge about history? In Stearns, P. N., P. C. Seixas, & S. Wineburg (Eds.), Knowing, teaching, and learning history: National and international perspectives (pp. 38-50).


Appendix A - Request for Consent

To Whom It May Concern:

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Mr. Christopher Jones, who is currently a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. Mr. Christopher Jones hopes to further understand a contextual explanation of why current theory in the field of historical understanding may not always be what instructors consider to be best practices (typically resulting in a lack of application) by addressing the following two questions:

1. How have history teachers’ beliefs about teaching history affected their instructional practice?
2. To what extent have these beliefs been shaped by research in the field of historical understanding?

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because your education, experience and position as a high school history teacher provides the unique perspective required to examine the topic. Your consent is also being sought. If you decide to participate, Mr. Christopher Jones will be conducting the following process.

1. Mr. Christopher Jones will conduct an interview with you in an effort to ascertain your beliefs concerning the teaching of history and to what extent they have been shaped by current research. These interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and shared with you to improve the accuracy of Christopher Jones’ understanding.

2. Mr. Christopher Jones will examine and observe one or possibly two lesson plans/lessons that you teach. This will be done to better understand how your practice aligns with your beliefs and research in the contextual environment of the classroom.

3. You will participate in a focus group with the other individuals who have elected to participate in this study. The purpose of the focus group will be to elicit deeper understandings concerning the application of current research.

While the interview, classroom observation, and focus group will take approximately a total of six hours to complete, more time will be required on an “as needed” basis. This time will be reserved for clarification of observations, interpretations, and analysis. Your review of my conclusions is vital to their credibility. It is important to note that you may refuse to answer any questions, or ask that transcribed material be stricken and not used at any time.

While you may receive the benefit of an objective analysis of your practice in comparison to your beliefs, there may also be some concern you have due to the fact that Mr. Christopher Jones holds a position that is responsible for evaluating your performance. In an effort to alleviate this, Mr. Christopher Jones will not be acting in the capacity of your evaluator for the entirety of the school year. In addition, any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. If you give Christopher Jones your permission by signing
this document, he plans to disclose all data collected along with the results of its analysis to Dr. Chris Unger and Northeastern University to fulfill the requirements set forth for obtaining a Doctorate of Education.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Mr. Christopher Jones, Seekonk High School, the Seekonk School District, or Northeastern University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without penalty. The Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University has reviewed and approved the present research.

If you have any further questions concerning this study, please contact Mr. Christopher Jones at either bellbubb@gmail.com or (508) 207-7071. If you have any questions concerning your rights as they pertain to this research project, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE, HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

Upon your request and signature, you will be given a copy of this completed form to keep for your records.

Please indicate your consent by signing below:

_____________________________________    __________ __________
Signature of person agreeing to take part   Date

_____________________________________
Printed name of person above

_____________________________________    _________________________
Signature of person obtaining consent   Date

_____________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix B – Interview Protocol

This appendix contains the basic protocol to be used for the interview portion of data collection. It is meant as an overview of a guide meant to assure as much consistency as possible.

Actions before the Interview

The interviewee will have had the consent form explained and signed. The interviewer will have contacted the interviewee to set a time, date, and place that was mutually agreeable with preference given to the comfort of the interviewee. All parties involved will be informed of the interviewer’s intent to record each session.

Opening Script

There will be a standard opening script read before each interview to retain consistency among sessions. Information given here will include the purpose of the project, an explanation of the protocol, disclosure of the session being recorded, and a verbal consent to continue the interview from the interviewee. The interviewee will also be thanked and informed that they will be provided with a copy of the transcripts for review. Upon completion of this opening, the interviewee will be asked to give any background information they wish, but must include their name, position, and experience.

Questions

- Begin with simple, open questions that represent the main points to be discussed.
- Use follow up questions to gain deeper information.
- Probe for more personal, reflective information concerning the main issues.

Closing Script

A closing script will be produced to retain consistency. It will thank the interviewee for participation, remind them of their rights to withdraw, and remind them that they will be receiving a copy of the transcripts to approve.

Actions after the Interview

- Send handwritten thank you.
- Transcribe recorded interview.
- Send transcription to interviewee for correction, clarification, approval, or denial.
- Send request for lesson plans and date for classroom observation.
Appendix C – Interview Questions

I. DEMOGRAPHICS
   A. What is your present age?
   B. How many years have you been teaching?
      1. What various levels have you taught throughout your career?
      2. Were you in another career field before education? What was it?
   C. What is the current level of education you have completed?
      1. What licenses do you currently hold?
      2. What other qualifications do you have?
   D. Have you ever been officially recognized for professional achievement in education?
   E. Do you belong to any professional organizations? If so, which ones?

II. ABOUT HISTORY
   A. What do you feel is the most important thing for kids to learn in history? Why?
   B. What do you feel are the most important things for students to understand in history?
   C. Do you think there is a difference between learning and understanding history? What is it and how does it look?
   D. What does it look like when teaching history looks really good? Give me an example. Do you have any examples? Why does that look good?
   E. How do you know that was good teaching? How were the students responding? How did you create that?
   F. What did you do to create that, what did it look like, how did you respond, what makes you think it was good/bad, give me some examples, why was it good...Can you say more...tell me more interesting things.
   G. What does it look like when it is really bad?

III. ABOUT THEM
   A. What was learning history like for you in school?
   B. Remember a time for you that it seemed really powerful...or bad...for you. What was that like?
   C. Why do you teach? How did you come to teach history? Do you like it? What do you like about it? What don't you like about it?
   D. What are you reading? What have you read?
   E. What type of professional development? What was useful? What wasn't useful?
   F. What are your interactions with colleagues like?
   G. how much and how they think about the standards
   H. What is it about some teachers that makes them resilient, subversive enough to go the extra mile because the standards do not constitute what research shows is best for historical understanding and literacy.

IV. CLOSE
   A. Is there anything you would like to add?
B. Has this interview made you think of anything concerning the teaching and learning of history that you either didn’t think about before or perceived differently?
I. Please remember that we are all here to speak freely, openly, and honestly. We will only have a productive discussion if everyone keeps an open mind, realizes people have different beliefs, builds on those beliefs, and doesn’t give false opinions for the sake of the group.

II. It may help to hear that many of you expressed that the practice and knowledge of history is furthered through disagreement, debate, and argument. Along those lines, there are plenty of opportunities through common planning, department meetings, and the creation of common assignments and assessments to disagree with each other.
   A. How does the department deal with different methods of instruction and interpretations of history?

III. Most of you described teaching as a highly personalized craft. Some of you even expressed a concern that people are trying to make it quantifiable. This only bore out in a few of your classroom lessons where you adjusted for the students.
   A. Why do you believe it is highly personalized?
   B. How does that bear out in your instruction?

IV. Your lessons seem to be loosely written, meaning more focused on materials and directions rather than activities and actions.
   A. What is the purpose of this?
   B. Does it reflect your style of teaching?

V. All of you mentioned the importance of climate in your classrooms. You said class should be fun, a safe place, and engaging. This did not hold true in some of the classes I observed where the lecture was prominent and engagement sagged.
   A. What are some of the reasons for not practicing what we believe is best?
   B. Why do you hold the classroom climate so high on your list?
   C. Is there a time when the straight learning of history is more important that the climate of the class?

VI. How much do your current beliefs about teaching history match or differ from your experiences as a student?
   A. Do you believe that those experiences have had a long lasting impact on how you teach history?
   B. Could you please give me examples of this?

VII. One of the items that stood out to me was that, as a group, most of you do not read any literature concerning teaching for historical understanding, yet quite a few of you practice research based strategies in your class.
   A. How does something like this happen?
   B. What is it about your beliefs concerning the teaching of history that makes you think you are practicing your craft the best possible way?
   C. Could you please give me examples of this?
VIII. Research shows, as well as many of your previous answers, that students increase their understanding when they find a connection or personal investment on their own. Yet in multiple classrooms, I noticed quite a few connections being made for the students.
   A. At what point do we stand back, let students make that leap, and fill in where they miss?

IX. Some of you expressed an opposition to becoming facilitators rather than teachers, while research shows that students learn best if they are guided to their own discovery. This belief was evident in the lessons observed.
   A. Which position (teacher or facilitator) do you believe is most beneficial to students and how does that mesh with your beliefs concerning the importance of content versus skills?

X. Many times, when I asked what good teaching looks like, most of you described how the students were reacting. Conversely, when I asked the same question about bad teaching, many of you gave personalized examples of how you looked.
   A. What constitutes good or bad teaching and whose fault or responsibility is it?
   B. Do you believe that there is a universal set of best practices for teaching historical understanding?
   C. Is it more “wise practices”
   D. Is the purpose of history to learn the past or understand the future? Please explain why?
   E. Specifically, how do you teach for understanding?

XI. Some of you stated a desire for a state test that resembles the current MCAS.
   A. If you are teaching for understanding why do you wish there was a test to validate the knowledge the state requires you to teach?
   B. Is it for a sense of accomplishment or validation?
   C. How does that affect your classroom teaching?