The Experience of Males and Females in High School History:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

by

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Abstract

Educational research is divided on the role of gender in schooling. Research has largely focused on math and science, but quantitative studies conducted by the College Board (2002) and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) show that male and female high school students perform differently and are differently engaged in their history classes. This phenomenon has not been explored at the classroom level. The primary research question this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study explored was: How do male and female students make sense of their experience with a high school history class? The purpose was to help teachers understand how males and females experience history in order to promote teaching practices that equitably promote achievement and engagement. Social Cognitive Learning Theory, with a focus on self-efficacy, provided the theoretical framework through which the experience of males and females with high school history was studied. This research investigated student self-beliefs and explored how males and females interpreted their success with certain content, instruction and assessment. Male participants reported experiencing higher levels of engagement and a stronger experience with deep authentic learning than female participants, particularly the females who lacked feelings of confidence, competence and self-efficacy. The study confirmed that males and females are engaged by different historical content. Participants regardless of gender reported experiencing higher levels of engagement in class, more interest in the content of their class and more learning when they experienced and sensed that teachers were highly enthused with the topic of study or in them as learners.

Key Words: history, engagement, IPA, self-efficacy, learning, achievement, experience, gender, Social Cognitive Learning Theory.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Regardless of where it is found — in popular periodicals, the teachers’ cafeteria or peer reviewed journals — the debates associated with gender, equity and schooling are often contentious and rarely settled. Research scholars and the mainstream press debate the role that gender plays in schooling. In an overview of existing literature, Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel (2008) described studies which have identified a “boy crisis” where girls outperform boys on standardized tests, have higher graduation rates, fewer special education and disciplinary referrals. In contrast studies reviewed by Buchmann et al. (2008) suggest that female students are bound by old stereotypes and expectations (p. 319-337). In 2006, Sara Mead, a senior policy analyst at The Education Sector captured why the debate rages on:

Although there are a host of statistics about how boys and girls perform in school, we actually know very little about why these differences exist or how important they are. There are many things—including biological, developmental, cultural, and educational factors—that affect how boys and girls do in school. But untangling these different influences is incredibly difficult (p. 14).

Mead’s commentary suggests that in this era of high stakes testing and accountability, the educational community knows a great deal about performance and achievement levels, but does not understand, at a phenomenological level, “what is going on,” in our classrooms. SATs, College Board Exams, ACTs, and state standardized tests shed light on the achievement of males and females, but have not helped us understand the lived experience of male and female students at the classroom level. Despite the mountains of standardized test data, few studies have given voice to the experience of males and females in ways that would help us truly understand the performance differences that we know exist.
Studies that do sift through and analyze the national standardized assessments have tended to focus on math and science, while less attention has been given to other disciplines particularly high school history (Buchmann et al., 2008, pp. 319-337). This oversight is troubling given the findings published by the United States Department of Education in the form of the Nation’s Report Card. This comprehensive and representative study of the 2009 transcripts of over 37,000 high school graduates reveals that the grade point average gender gap is wider in social studies than in math and science. More specifically, female GPAs in social studies courses were, on average, 0.21 points higher than their male counterparts in the same subject. Additionally, an April 2011 report reveals that, though the credit gap has been closed in math and science, it is statistically significant in social studies where females earn 0.1 more credits in social studies than male students. Other U.S. Department of Education data suggests, however, that males achieve at higher levels than females. On the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress in U.S. History, males scored 4 points higher than females at grades 8 and 12 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). This gap is wider today than it was the last time the history NAEP was administered in 2001.

There are also discrepancies in the type of historical content that supports and appeals to males and females (NCES, 2010; College Board, 2002). History students also seem to experience assessments differently. A 2002 report by the College Board report shows that assessments can be “male oriented” or “female oriented” depending on the content and format of the questions. The experience of this researcher, as a high school history teacher from 1990-2001, supports the findings of these nationwide studies. In his experience, female students achieved higher grades, but males seemed more engaged and able to think critically about the subject matter.
The gender-based discrepancies revealed by these studies represent a significant problem of practice. As a discipline that shapes our individual and collective identities; promotes civic literacy; encourages critical writing, speaking, reading and thought and helps us understand how past and present societies progress and develop, it is vital that every student, male and female, experience history in engaging, meaningful, challenging and thought-provoking ways. If history education serves to nurture American ideals such as liberty, equality and opportunity, it is important that males and females experience equity and opportunity in their history classroom. Additionally, it is critically important in today’s educational climate of accountability and standardization that history educators understand how to support the achievement of both genders as individual learners. The success of educators and schools is judged today, not on the success of a whole school or whole classroom, but on the success of every student.

Although existing data sets point to a significant problem for practicing history teachers, researchers have not illuminated the experience of male and female history students. The experience of males and females with their high school history class remains elusive. The problem of practice revealed by the NCES, the College Board and other studies has not been sufficiently explored at the classroom level in a manner that would help educators understand the experience of males and females. Researchers and practitioners need a clearer understanding of “what is going on” in America’s high school history classrooms. To use the language of Creswell (2009), the “complex set of factors” alluded to by Mead and surrounding the phenomenon of the high school history experience have not been sufficiently explored in a qualitative research study (Chapter 7, Qualitative Research Questions section, para. 2). Research that explores the experience of male and female history students is needed to fill a research gap.
and to develop educators’ capacity to differentiate curriculum and instruction in order to create classrooms that are more equitable and supportive of both genders.

**Central Research Question**

The primary research question this qualitative study explored is: How do male and female students make sense of their experience with a high school history class? Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach, the researcher explored and attempted to make sense of participants making sense of their experience with a high school history class. Student participants were twelfth graders, drawn from a suburban high school in Western Massachusetts, who shared the experience of having completed three high school history courses. The student participants also shared the experience of having average levels of academic achievement in history courses and in their overall academic program. Research focused on the students’ experience with their junior year U.S. History course. Three female students and three male students were selected. Supporting interview questions reflected the researcher’s preliminary understanding of “what is going on” and were derived from the primary intellectual goals of the project. Each interview question advanced the practical goal of improving instructional practice and was designed to build on the foundational knowledge provided by existing research. Most importantly, each interview question was intended to fill the gaps in the researcher’s understanding of how students make sense of their high school history experience. Using the IPA approach, three specific categories of interview questions were created:

1. How do male and female students experience the content or historical topics taught in a high school history class?
2. How do male and female students experience the variety of pedagogical or instructional approaches found in a high school history class?

3. How do male and female students experience the various forms of assessment used in a high school history class?

It is important to note that these interview questions represented jumping off points for the study and were expanded upon during the interviews. As the study progressed, the interviews became more exploratory and open-ended in order to learn more about the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of the participants and to allow the researcher to cautiously seek emerging themes and patterns in the manner prescribed by IPA research. Particular emphasis was placed on exploring the sense of self-efficacy students feel in connection to various forms of instruction and assessment and in connection with specific historical eras or topics. Throughout the study, student participants were asked to explain what forms of instruction, what types of assessments and what historical content best supported their style of learning and offered them the best chance for success.

**Relating the Discussion to Audiences**

Intellectually, this qualitative study will help researchers gain a rich, phenomenological understanding of the male and female history class experience. The study revealed the essence of the male and female experience and make sense of students making sense of their high school history experience (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, p. 35, 2009). Practically, the study has the potential to provide history educators with a working knowledge of male and female attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and their students’ degree of self-efficacy – factors which influence and shape performance and achievement (Miller, 2011, p. 244). Understanding male and female student perceptions of their classes, their attitudes and their experience with different historical
content, different approaches to instruction and different types of assessment will undoubtedly assist practicing teachers. The field of educational research will also benefit from a study that expands the base of research beyond math and science. Research on the achievement of females in math and science seems to have closed the achievement gap in these disciplines (Trends in Educational Equity of Girls and Women, 2004). It is hoped that this research will foster a similar conversation on how males and females experience high school history and on how to eliminate gender-based inequities or discrepancies in high school history classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Learning Theory provided the intellectual lens and theoretical framework through which the experience of male and female secondary history students was studied. Developed and advanced by Albert Bandura with the publication of Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory this framework builds on Social Learning Theory which proposes that children learn by observing and imitating the behavior of role models (Miller, 2011). Social Cognitive Learning Theory emphasizes the role of self-beliefs in shaping behavior. Rather than being driven by inner impulses or controlled by external stimuli, human action, from a Social Cognitive perspective, is the product of the “dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral and environmental influences” (Pajares, 2005, p. 340). Pajares (2005) explains that,

How people interpret the results of their own actions informs and alters their environments and the personal factors they possess, which, in turn, inform and alter future actions. This is the foundation of Bandura’s conception of reciprocal determinism, the view that (a) personal factors in the form of cognition, affect,
and biological events, (b) behavior, and (c) environmental influences create interactions that result in a triadic reciprocality. (p. 340)

Bandura promoted the construct that every human action is unique and based on a complex and reciprocal set of personal and social influences. He believed that individuals contribute to their own development (Bussey and Bandura, 1999, p. 704). Combining this theoretical perspective with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis produced a deep and rich understanding of the unique experience of individual participants in this study. Though Bandura emphasized that individuals are self-organizing and self-regulating, he also understood how one’s environment shapes one’s cognition and one’s behavior. Given this, Social Cognitive Learning Theory can be also used to elicit student perceptions around classroom practices that promote or inhibit engagement and learning. This theory encouraged data collection through participant reflection on the powerful ways that teachers can influence behavior and academic performance.

Because Social Cognitive Learning Theory rejects the notion that human action is understandable solely in biological terms or solely as a product of environmental stimuli, a broad range of explanations of gender-based student behavior or performance could be considered. Social Cognitive Theory allowed the researcher to use thick participant interview data to evaluate the complex interplay of forces that Bandura identifies as being responsible for human behavior. Social Cognitive Theory proposes that gender development can be explained in terms of “triadic reciprocal causation” (Bussey and Bandura, 1999, p. 685). Within this model, “personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective and biological events, behavior patterns and environmental events all act as interacting determinants that influence each other bidirectionally” (Bussey and Bandura, 1999, 686). Therefore, within the framework of Social Cognitive Theory,
classroom environmental stimuli or conditions that promote or discourage achievement along the lines of gender could be effectively studied and the cognitive processes, affective states and past behaviors of participants could also be explored. Finally, a Social Cognitive framework also focused research on how student behavior or performance might become “sex-typed” based on models that are available for observation or imitation. In short, Social Cognitive Theory allowed for the type of open-ended inquiry demanded by an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach designed to understand the experience of males and females in a high school history class.

Self-efficacy is a concept that is central to Social Cognitive Theory and was helpful in seeking to understand why some succeed in a history classroom while others struggle or why some students are engaged and others are disengaged and why these differences seem rooted in gender. Self-efficacy has proven to be powerful predictor of success in academic and non-academic settings (Miller, 2011, p. 244; Pajares, 2005). Self-efficacy is a product of cognitive processes and is one of the influences that reciprocally interact to shape human behavior. Self-efficacy concepts are rooted in research demonstrating that one’s ability to learn and perform is based on one’s expectations and perceptions. If a student has strong feelings of self-efficacy based his/her past experiences, his/her emotional state or his/her interactions with the teacher and classmates, then he/she is likely to learn more and perform at a higher level (Bandura, 1997, pp.191-200). Self-efficacy theorists understand that every child’s learning experience is unique. Self-efficacy research demonstrates that learning does not occur in a linear, predictable fashion as a response to cognitive stimuli produced by a teacher in a classroom. Instead, learning is viewed as a complex, highly individualized process and not easily explained by quantitative methods. Thus, the self-efficacy component of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory justified a qualitative IPA approach to understand how males and females experienced their high school
history class. Self-efficacy is a useful lens for understanding students’ perceptions of their ability to succeed academically.

According to Bandura, individuals use four sources of information to construct their self-efficacy:

1. Their previous experiences. If they met with success on a task at some point in the past, they will tend to have higher levels of self-efficacy associated with that task.
2. Vicarious experiences. A peer or model’s success or failure on a task will influence their level of self-efficacy.
3. Verbal persuasion from others will affect their feelings of competence
4. Their physiological or affective state. Feelings of excitement, arousal, anxiety, pain will affect one’s feelings of self-competence (Miller, 2011, pp. 244-245).

As this study seeks to understand the experience of high school history students, it was important to understand how the participants’ self-beliefs were shaped. Research questions and specific interview questions associated with the four types of information children use to construct their efficacy beliefs were developed. Using this lens, this Interpretative Phenomological Analysis helped uncover whether male and female students experienced history class differently in terms of their emotional state and perceptions. As a study that will explore students’ own beliefs about their academic strengths, learning styles and areas of competence, this study is firmly grounded in Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy.

A self-efficacy lens also encouraged the researcher to explore areas where students felt strong and where they felt less confident. Additionally, it allowed the researcher to explore student self-beliefs and helped us understand how males and females interpret their success with
certain types of historical content, certain forms of instruction and certain types of assessment. Understanding these self-perceptions was critical as Bandura has demonstrated that student self-interpretations alter future or subsequent performance. Research explored whether one gender or another experienced higher levels of stress and anxiety in high school history classroom, feelings that are associated with lower levels of self-efficacy and lower levels of motivation, performance and persistence.

An efficacy lens also supported the practical goals of this research. Effective teachers need to understand their male and female students’ concepts of self-efficacy given that these efficacy expectations “influence performance by enhancing intensity and persistence of effort” (Bandura, 1977, p. 212). Educators focused on the performance outcomes of their students must understand the extent to which students entertain doubts or feel confident about the subject matter they are studying or their expected level of performance. By uncovering student self-efficacy beliefs, this study helps educators understand their students’ motivation levels and affective states, two powerful influences on self-efficacy.

Social Cognitive Theory with its emphasis on self-efficacy helped sharpen the focus of this research study that sought to understand how the experiences of males and females differ in a high school history classroom. Given the complexity of the topic and difficulty associated with untangling the influences shaping the experience of males and females it will helpful to view the problem through Bandura's powerful theoretical framework.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The following is a review of the existing body of academic research associated with this area of inquiry. As a literature review it is meant to support a qualitative IPA study exploring the experience of males and females in a high school history class. Though an IPA study requires a researcher to bracket off prior knowledge, understandings and preconceptions, a robust literature review provides a valuable way to understand the present topic and the body of knowledge associated with it. To support this study, four major bodies of literature were investigated:

1. A limited, but illustrative and representative review of literature on gender-based academic discrepancies, inequities and inequalities. For reasons explained below, this portion of the review is not intended to be, nor could it be, comprehensive or exhaustive.

2. A comprehensive review of literature and national data sets associated with the experience of males and females in history and social studies.

3. A review of the main, competing theoretical frameworks used to examine the unique academic experiences of male and female students.

4. A review of the competing methods and instruments used to examine the unique academic experiences of male and female students.

This literature review shed light on the problem of practice addressed in this study. The review revealed that despite decades of study and educational progress significant discrepancies in the academic experience of males and females exist. Males and females have very different academic experiences, but scholars disagree on the differences. Given this, and that the scholarship is largely focused on math and science, the review confirmed that additional exploration of history is needed and justified. The review also revealed the need to study the
topic through a wider theoretical lens not constrained by the limitations of critical theory or social learning theory, the two most commonly employed theories.

These theories, while illuminating and helpful to this researcher, do not provide a sufficiently broad theoretical lens. Unlike Social Cognitive Theory, these frameworks would not allow the problem to be studied open-endedly and will not allow the researcher to untangle a very complex and wide-ranging set of influences. Finally, a review of the methodological approaches demonstrated that this problem of practice has been most commonly approached quantitatively. Qualitative approaches, when they have been employed, have neglected the student experience and therefore do not provide educators with a rich narrative that would help them make sense of how students make sense of their high school experience. In short, the following literature review uncovers significant methodological, topical and theoretical gaps that exist in our understanding of the experience of high school history students.

**Illustrative Review of Literature on Gender-Based Academic Discrepancies, Inequities and Inequalities.**

Despite decades of effort by researchers, policy makers and educators to create a level playing field where male and female educational access and outcomes are equitable, gender remains a significant predictor of achievement in American public schools. There is no consensus, however, around what the performance-related effects are, nor is there a complete understanding of how male and female students experience schooling in a phenomenological sense. Before the turn of the recent century, research consistently demonstrated gender bias against female students in standardized tests, teaching practices, textbooks, school culture, teacher expectations, and co-curricular sports (AAUW, 1992). Today, the picture is less clear. Research scholars and the mainstream press debate whether gender bias still exists. In a
comprehensive literature review, Bachmann, DiPrete and McDaniel (2008) noted that there is an equal amount of research today examining the way girls and women are disadvantaged in some aspects of education as there is research exploring ways they “continue to trail men and boys” (Bachmann, et al., 2008, p. 320). Many argue that boys are beginning to lag behind academically. These researchers describe a “boy crisis” where girls outperform boys on standardized tests, have higher graduation rates, fewer Special Education and disciplinary referrals and enter college at higher rates (Kafer, 2007; Sax, 2008; Clark, Flower, Walton, Oakley, 2008; Burns and Bracey, 2001; Clark, Lee, Goodman and Yaco, 2008).

Other researchers disagree, presenting evidence that girls are still educationally bound by old stereotypes and are socialized to “disguise their cleverness” (Skelton, 2010; Skelton, Francis, Read, 2010). Brown (2007) and Plantea et al (2009) found that students themselves hold unsubstantiated stereotypes that gender-based performance and achievement patterns exist.

Downey and Yuan’s (2005) research question was explicit - why do girls and boys excel at different components of schooling. Their inquiry rested on their contention that girls and boys vary in performance and achievement. Specifically, they cited research showing that girls do better on reading and verbal tests, while boys have a small advantage in math test scores. Downey and Yuan added to the body of research on gender-based performance by looking beyond math test scores or other measurements that are typically cited to describe the alleged educational crisis facing boys. Their research is based on analysis of differences in reading and verbal test scores, grades, placement in remedial classes and graduation rates. Downey and Yuan concluded that the more appropriate classroom behavior of girls and their academically-oriented, out-of-school activities correlated with the higher course grades they tend to receive. Bachmann, DiPrete and McDaniel cite an additional seven studies, not directly reviewed as part
of this project, which conclude that female social skills and school behaviors provide them with an academic advantage over males (Bachmann et al., 2008, p. 322-323).

Mead’s (2006) meta-analysis adds another perspective. Mead’s research asked if the “boy crisis” is real and how policy makers, parents and educators should respond to most recent gender based achievement data. Rather than making a case that either boys or girls are winning, Mead’s research provides a balanced and nuanced view of gender based performance. Mead rejected the popular notion that boys are falling behind, yet accepted that girl gains have been significant in recent years. Mead linked the problem of gender inequity to the problems of racial and income inequality, concluding that researchers and policy makers must avoid simplistic descriptions and solutions and should disaggregate gender data by race, income and grade level.

Though scholars disagree on performance and achievement patterns and the extent to which gender affects a student’s experience, there is more of a consensus around the correlation between gender and motivation and engagement. Wallace (2006) and Skelton (2010) have concluded that girls are better at “doing school” and understand how to earn higher grades even if they are less engaged. Several researchers contend that female students report higher levels of motivation (Martin, 2004; Kissau, Kolano and Wang, 2010).

The review of literature on gender-based academic performance, achievement and engagement is meant to be illustrative and representative of existing research. A full and complete review of gender-based discrepancies and inequities in education is not practical or possible within the confines of this study, nor would it be valuable. It is sufficient for the purposes of this study to report that the literature surveyed clearly demonstrates that males and females have entirely different academic experiences. A clear research-based consensus does not exist on how, why or in what ways the experience differs, but the review does illuminate a
problem of educational practice and demonstrates that we do not fully understand, on quantitative or qualitative basis, the academic experience of males and females.

A Review of Literature and Data Sets Associated with History and Social Studies

Largely, the research has focused on the performance and engagement of males and females in math and science and to a lesser extent, English Language Arts. The lack of attention to other subjects, particularly social studies and history, is concerning given the findings recently published by the United States Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics in the form of the Nation’s Report Card. This comprehensive and representative study of the 2009 transcripts of over 37,000 high school graduates reveals that the grade point average (GPA) gender gap is wider in social studies than in math and science. More specifically, female GPAs in social studies courses were, on average, 0.21 points higher than their male counterparts in the same subject. Additionally, the April 2011 report reveals that, though the credit gap has been closed in math and science, it is statistically significant in social studies where females earn 0.1 more credits in social studies than male students. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) standardized tests reveal a different pattern suggesting that males achieve at higher levels than females in history. The 2006 NAEP scores in U.S. History, gathered from exams administered in 4th, 8th and 12th grade showed that males scored 4 points higher than females at grades 8 and 12. This gap is wider today than it was the last time the U.S. History NAEP was administered in 2001.

A narrower, but valuable study of gender-based performance differences on standardized tests was conducted by the College Board (2002). The study considered whether gender based performance differences correlate with the content of A.P. Exam questions in U.S. History, European History, Biology, Microeconomics, and Macroeconomics were studied. In this sense,
the College Board researchers were oriented toward assessment patterns, an approach different from the research cited in the studies mentioned above. Researchers in this study conclude that that males tend to perform better on items relating to conflict, politics, and the time period after World War II, while females tend to perform better on items relating to social and cultural history.

Disappointingly, few scholars have tapped into these important national data sets to fully assess and understand how gender intersects with performance in high school history class. NAEP results and the College Board study justify and call for further non-quantitative inquiry into the experience of males and females. Qualitatively understanding the lived experience of male and female history study could enrich the literature base and help us understand national assessment data.

The difference in the beliefs, attitudes and motivation of male and female high school history students has also received little scholarly attention. Limited research suggests that males and females appear to be engaged by different types of content in their U.S. History classes with boys skewing towards topics relating to war, politics and the time period after WWII and girls favoring content relating to arts and literature, marginalized groups, social reform movements, religion and women (NCES, 2010; College Board, 2002). An early quantitative study by Chapin (1998) investigated NAEP gender gaps and used data from three NCES-published National Education Longitudinal Studies. Chapin concluded that boys have a more positive view of history and are more likely to participate in history clubs. Boys at the 8th grade level participated in more advanced social studies classes. Overall, however, only small gender differences were linked to enrollment in advanced classes. As research that highlights my problem of practice and provides a preliminary sense of how the male and female experience differs in a high school
history class, Chapin’s work is highly applicable. In summary, however, there is a glaring shortage of research associated with history and social studies. Researchers and practitioners know very little about how males and females experience their history class and why performance and engagement discrepancies, inequalities and inequities exist.

**A Review of Competing Theoretical Frameworks**

Social Learning Theory and Critical Feminist Theory stand out as the two main theoretical frameworks that have been used to examine the role that gender plays in the performance and engagement of students. Most commonly, researchers have applied Social Learning Theory in an effort to understand how learning is influenced by social context (Miller, 2011). Through this lens several studies have examined the prevalence of stereotypes. Plantea, Theoreta and Favreaub (2009) explored student perceptions of the “maleness and femaleness” of math and language arts classes and found that traditional stereotypes favoring boys in math have diminished. Brown (2007) identified differences in the perceptions held by students about school performance even when there were no statistically significant differences in the actual achievement of those students based on gender. Though valuable, these studies have viewed the experience of males and females through a narrow lens where behavior is largely seen as a product of external stimuli.

Also, through the lens of Social Learning Theory many researchers have studied whether boys and girls vary in feelings of self-efficacy and in their levels of motivations. Martin (2004) concluded that females were more motivated in school, but these differences were primarily ones of degree, rather than kind. Kissau, Kolano and Wang (2010) studied the perceptions of gender differences in high school students’ motivation to learn Spanish. In this study, boys perceived themselves as less motivated than their female peers. These studies of motivation and self-
efficacy echo a common theme that girls have been socialized to “do school” better than boys. For Mau and Lynn (2000) this is reflected in homework completion; Martin (2004) describes a stronger “learning focus” by females; to Downey and Yuan (2005) girls are better school citizens; and Wallace (2006) investigated how girls play the “school game” better than boys. Skelton (2010) reached a similar conclusion.

The self-efficacy framework employed by these researchers has value and relevance to this study and justifies an application of the self-efficacy construct within Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory. Each of these studies demonstrates the importance of addressing how students cognitively process their history class experience. The meanings students make powerfully shape their academic behaviors and performance. These studies confirm that understanding student perceptions, self-beliefs and behaviors is critical to understanding how students make sense of their high school history experience. Still, the present inquiry demands a framework that also factors in all three elements of Bandura’s triadic model of behavior.

Critical Education theory, which disputes the meritocratic view of schooling (McClaren, 1986) and presupposes that schools do not provide the same opportunities for success to all races, classes and genders, has also been commonly applied as a theoretical framework. Through this lens, researchers have studied the role that schools and teachers play in reproducing or maintaining social stratification and gender inequality and have critically examined practices that perpetuate gender stereotypes or gender based inequity. Several important studies have described how schools perpetuate stereotypes. In a unique study, with relevance to this inquiry, in which they asked students to “Draw a Picture” of a historical figure, Fournier and Wineburg (1997) showed how female history student perceptions were influenced by their study of a past “populated almost exclusively by men” (p.178).
Also writing from a feminist perspective, Skelton (2010) asked if schools were, in fact, short changing boys in the manner described by the popular press. Using achievement data from the United Kingdom, Skelton refuted the theory that girls have academically surpassed boys. Skelton’s research suggests that, though they receive higher grades, girls are consistently found to be more anxious and less confident than their male peers. Collectively, Skelton, Francis and Read (2010) were critical of an educational system that forces girls to conform and hide their intelligence and motivation. Skelton’s research highlights the importance of understanding that gender equity must take factors other than raw achievement data into account. There are many definitions of educational success and researchers must make it clear which definition they are using.

Other feminist oriented research has concluded that “new gender gaps” have replaced the old gaps that were seen in math and science. (AAUWEF, Gender Gaps: Where schools still fail our children, 1998).

The mainstream emergence of the Feminist Movement in the middle of the Twentieth Century undoubtedly fueled a national conversation on this gender-based performance in schools. The Feminist Movement critically evaluated schooling on the extent to which it provided equal access and outcomes for females and on whether it helped break down social and economic barriers hindering the advancement of American women. Prior to the emergence of feminism, schooling was mostly evaluated on the extent to which it provided an educated and skilled workforce to promote industrial and economic growth. The conversation shifted again, however, in the first decade of the Twenty-First Century when the mainstream press began to explore the phenomenon of a “boy crisis” in American public education. Two books on the topic, The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men by C.H.
Sommers and *Boys Adrift: Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men*, by Dr. Leonard Sax, synthesized new research and gained widespread appeal. Both books framed the popular conception that young males were underachieving and unmotivated. Building on this argument in a more scholarly way was Kenneth E. Wallace (2006). Using state and national standardized testing data to frame his research, Wallace’s problem of practice was the underachievement of male students. Wallace delimited his study by focusing on nine elementary, middle, and high school teachers from the suburban Chicago area to determine teacher knowledge of the phenomenon, school acknowledgement of the problem, and strategies being utilized or recommended to close the performance gap between girls and boys. He further delimited his study by focusing exclusively on language arts. His study revealed that schools usually overlook student achievement by gender and that teachers generally are unaware of performance differences. His research also suggested ways for classroom teachers to differentiate instruction to support male and female achievement and learning.

The Critical Perspective adds significantly to the body of literature associated with the male and female academic experience. The researched conclusions associated with critical theory clearly open the door to investigate whether or not students experience bias or stereotyping. However, inherently, critical theory, can only be used to illuminate an aspect of this study’s problem of practice. It would not be useful in interpreting how males make meaning of their experience. To fully understand the student experience through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, a broader, more open-ended perspective is required.
A Review of Competing Methods and Instruments

Researchers investigating the relationship between gender and performance and engagement have employed an assortment of methods and instruments. Most common were quantitative studies that analyzed large volumes of national standardized testing data. This approach is taken by Downey and Yuan (2005), Scafidi and Bui (2010), the College Board (2002), and Mau and Lynn (2000) among others. These studies will certainly frame the problem of practice associated with my investigation and sharpened the focus of my research questions. Several other quantitative studies gathered data through student self reporting (Martin, 2004; Plantea, Theoreta and Favreaub, 2009; Kissau, Kolano and Wang, 2010; Mau and Lynn, 2000). The questionnaires employed in these studies informed the interviews that were be conducted as part of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. A qualitative study by Wallace (2006) stand outs and, though it focuses on teacher behavior and language arts classes, its methodology provides useful considerations. Wallace studied nine K-12 language arts teachers from suburban Chicago and compiled data using classroom observation and interviews. Brown (2007) employed a mixed methodological approach combining an analysis of questionnaire generated data and participant interviews. Kissua, Kolano and Wang employed a similar approach in their mixed methodological study.

Though an assortment of methods and instruments have been employed to study the male and female academic experience, this review did not uncover a study that will methodologically mirror or assist the present study in any significant way. The lack of research studying the specific lived experience of male and female students who have taken a high school history class illustrates a gap in the research base and provides a rationale for studying this problem of practice using the tools and methods of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.
Outstanding Issues

The research base on gender differences in education is broad. The problem has been studied through a variety of theoretical frameworks, using different (and sometimes conflicting) sets of data, with a broad array of research questions. Still, much work needs to be done, particularly around the experience of girls and boys in disciplines other than math and science. NCES data sets reveal statistically significant discrepancies in the experience of males and females in high school history and point to an educational problem that is worthy of additional study and has not been fully explored.

This literature review reveals that we know that gender based discrepancies, inequities and inequalities exist in American high school history classes, yet because no valuable qualitative studies exist, we do not know why this problem exists or how the experience of males and females in their history classes might be contributing to these gender gaps. The field of educational research would benefit from a study that expands the base of research beyond math and science; explores if gender differences manifest themselves at the classroom level; incorporates a theoretical framework that allows for broad, open-ended inquiry; and employs qualitative methods to untangle a complex set of environmental, behavioral and cognitive factors that shape the experience of male and female history students. The limitations and gaps uncovered by this literature review suggest the research community and practicing educators do not fully understand the unique meanings that male and female students make from their high school history class experience.
Chapter III: Research Design

Introduction and Purpose Statement

As Sara Mead and others have pointed out, despite decades of study, researchers and practitioners are not equipped with a full understanding of the experience of male and female students in high school. A debate continues in academic circles and in the mainstream media among scholars and practitioners on the male and female experience of schooling. The issue of gender gaps, the experiences of males and females students and challenges of inequity continue to be disputed or unknown. The gap in our understanding is more pronounced in connection with the male and female high school history experience. Math and science and to a lesser extent English Language Arts, have been the topic of academic study, but history has been overlooked. Researchers and practitioners have yet to untangle the “complex set of factors” that shape the experience of male and female high school students. When history has been the focus, researchers have only analyzed achievement data collected by nationally standardized exams including the National Assessment of Educational Progress and Advancement Placement Exams. Additional research, at the classroom level, is needed to understand how males and females experience their high school history classroom.

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was to explore the experience of three 12th grade male and three 12th grade female students with their 11th grade U.S. history class at a suburban school in Western Massachusetts. Each student participant shared the experience of completing their junior-year U.S. History class at an average level of performance. The primary research question the study explored is: How do male and female students make sense of their experience with a high school history class? The practical goal of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was to help teachers understand how males and
females make sense of their experience with high school history class in order to promote teaching practices and curriculum designs that equitably promote the achievement of male and female students.

**Positionality Statement**

An important first step in developing an IPA study is to consider and disclose the positionality of the researcher. The question of how male and female students experience their high school history class has been significant in my personal and professional life. As a beginning history teacher, I struggled to create a learning environment that equitably served male and female students. I realized that, although female students performed well in my classes, they did not seem as enthusiastically engaged as their male counterparts. As my career progressed, I realized that critical pedagogical decisions relating to curriculum, instruction and assessment had to be made with gender in mind in order to create equitable, equally-engaging classroom environments. The importance of this was underscored when my daughters experienced high school history for the first time several years ago in a school district outside the scope of this study. Wanting my daughters to experience success and engagement in their history classes, I sought to understand their experience and learn what types of curriculum, instruction or assessment supported their performance and enhanced their experience. As I transitioned from the classroom to school administration, the topic of this research remained an important one and became the central focus of my doctoral studies.

Though my prior experience with this research topic is foundational and provides a partial justification for additional inquiry, it will be important for me to deliberately and consciously set aside, to the extent possible, my own prior experiences, understandings and perspectives. In any research this is important, but it is essential to the validity of IPA research.
Following the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009), as an IPA researcher I will attempt to “bracket off” my preconceptions and prior concerns in order to fully engage with the students whose unique experience I am seeking to understand. IPA research demands openness, a willingness to abandon preconceptions and “intense attentiveness” to the perceptions, understandings and experiences of the participants. Bracketing will allow the participants’ experiences to surface, be interpreted and understood whether they match my preconceptions or not.

In addition to bracketing off perspectives and beliefs developed during my tenure as a history teacher, I will also have to bracket off my role as the Superintendent of Schools for the research site. It will be critical that I approach this study as a doctoral student concerned with understanding the experience of the participants rather than as a Superintendent concerned with the quality and effectiveness of the District’s curriculum, instruction and assessment. To this end, I must be prepared to not act in a supervisory or evaluative way if I hear negative feedback from student participants.

Research Design

To adequately support the performance, engagement and motivation of male and female history students in ways that are equitable, we must first understand their experience and more specifically, we must understand how they make sense out of this experience. As Bandura (1977) has demonstrated, three interdependent and reciprocal factors shape human development and actions. Bandura explains that these factors – the behavioral, personal and environmental - work in reciprocal fashion to shape the human experience. Bandura’s triadic explanation reminds us that the experience of students is a complex phenomenon embedded in a complex
social and cultural context. To fully understand the student experience and to adequately address the identified research questions, this study will require a qualitative design.

Defined by Creswell (2009) as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem,” qualitative design originates from a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm or world view (Chapter One, para. 3). Ponterotto’s (2005) description of constructivist-interpretivist paradigm captures an important philosophical underpinning of this study and establishes a justification for employing qualitative study operating within Bandura’s Social Cognitive Framework. Citing the work of J.T. Hansen (2004) Ponterotto (2005) writes, “Essentially, constructivists hold that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual, rather than it being an externally singular entity” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). A constructivist-interpretivist paradigm guided the selection of theory, method and research tools used in this study.

Quantitative approaches rooted in a post-positivist paradigm that seek cause-and-effect explanations or reduce the high school history experience to a set of isolated variables have helped identify a problem of practice, but have failed to help us understand the overall experience of males and females in a high school history class. On a practical level, quantitative approaches have failed to provide practitioners with approaches that equitably promote the achievement of their male and female history students.

A qualitative methodology, on the other hand, allowed for the student experience to be explored inductively in a naturalistic, holistic way. A wider, open-ended, exploratory approach was employed and multi-causal explanations aligned with Bandura’s framework were sought. A qualitative approach allowed students to tell their stories, in their own words from their own unique, social and cultural standpoint. Hearing students’ rich stories added to the richness of our
understanding in a way that could not be achieved using quantitative tools. Perhaps the best explanation of why a statistical, quantitative approach did not fit this study is provided by Creswell. He explains that there are some topics that, “are difficult to capture with existing measures, and these measures may not be sensitive to issues such as gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences. To level all individuals to a statistical mean overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in our study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40).

Creswell (2007) notes several other characteristics of a qualitative study. Each can be said to characterize this study as well. These characteristics include: positioning the researcher as a key instrument in the data collection process; analyzing data inductively working back and forth between participant data and emerging themes; focusing on the meaning participants make of their experience; employing a flexible or emergent research process; pursuing inquiry that is interpretive (Creswell, 2007, p. 37-39).

**Research Tradition**

Within qualitative design several research approaches are possible. Because this study was concerned with the experience of a particular people in a particular context, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was be employed. IPA was aptly suited to a study that attempted to explore and make sense of participants making sense of their experience in a high school history class. IPA is a rigorous, intense research process that uses rich, detailed accounts, typically semi-structured interviews, from a small number of participants, to study how a group of people in a specific context have experienced a particular phenomenon. Generally speaking an IPA approach allowed for a detailed examination of the particular student’s unique, personal experience, which subsequently was used to move cautiously toward more general claims.
Philosophically, IPA is linked to three intellectual traditions that explain how knowledge and understanding is acquired: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11). Phenomenology is concerned with an individual’s subjective experience and offers a way to examine and comprehend the *essence* of a lived experience. It is an intellectual tradition that orients IPA toward an understanding that the perspective of the researcher and the participant greatly influence how the experience is interpreted. For the purpose of this study the phenomenological influence on IPA meant that, to the extent possible, the researcher had to be able and willing to “bracket off” preconceptions and prior knowledge in order to explore the topic open-endedly and inductively. The hermeneutic influence on IPA grounded the researcher in a methodology that required him/her to move back and forth between his/her understanding and the data. This back and forth “hermeneutic” exercise deepened our understanding of the meaning male and female history students make of their history experience. The idiographic influence, with its emphasis on unique situational phenomena, provides IPA with a focus on and a method for understanding the particular experience of a particular people in a particular context (Smith et al, 2009, pp. 11-29).

IPA is particularly well aligned with Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory, the framework that guided this research. In both traditions the meaning is the experience. IPA-oriented researchers believe that, “Experience can be understood by the meanings which people impress upon it” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 34). IPA and Social Cognitive Theory rest on the premise that cognitive processes and physiological and affective responses shape one’s experience and influence one’s actions and behaviors. IPA allowed for investigation consistent with Bandura’s framework. More specifically, IPA provided an approach to exploring student self-perceptions and self-beliefs and allowed the researcher to understand male and female levels of self-efficacy.
Beyond the personal factors that Bandura identifies as influencing experience, IPA provided a means to investigate environmental and behavioral factors, the second and third parts of the triadic model.

Most importantly, an IPA approach was aligned with the intellectual and practical goals of this study. The main research question – “How do male and female high school students make sense of their experience with a high school history class?” - required the researcher to make sense of the participants who tried, via a semi-structured interview, to make sense of their history class experience. Additional interview questions were also aligned with an IPA approach in that they included questions about the participants’ “understandings, experiences and sense-making activities” associated with their high school history experience (Smith et al. 2009, p. 47).

To fully answer the primary and secondary research question, IPA requires close, reflective analysis of the interview data. Answering the research question required the researcher, in the steps described below, to search cautiously for emergent themes and patterns across participant cases. Though IPA focuses on the particular experience of particular individuals, generalizations associated with the research questions were developed, but only cautiously.

**Participants**

Given the unique nature of IPA qualitative studies, it would be valuable to describe the sampling requirements of IPA research. This explanation and the sampling strategies employed by this study relied largely on the methodological planning recommendations of Smith et al. (2009). In IPA research, because the goal is to understand the experience of a particular group, in a particular context, sampling must be purposive and selected. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher access to rich accounts of participants’ unique experiences within a unique social and cultural setting. Participants needed to be accessible to the researcher and had to be willing
and able to provide thorough, detailed answers to interview questions. For this reason, in IPA studies it is important for the researcher to have access to “gatekeepers” who can refer qualified and accessible participant candidates.

IPA research, with its idiographic orientation, does not expect or require samples to be representative of a larger population. In fact, for practical and philosophical reasons, IPA participant populations are small, typically 3-6 individuals. Smaller sample sizes allow for intense, detailed data collection and analysis. Larger sample sizes of the number typically associated with qualitative studies would be impractical in terms of researcher time and would not yield detailed, experiential data. Additionally, the depth of participant accounts, which is critical to phenomenological understanding, would be sacrificed by increasing the size of the sample. Further, the sample is expected to be homogeneous. Creswell (2007) notes that in a phenomenological study, “the more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common experiences, themes and the overall essence of the experience for all participants” (p. 122). A critical methodological decision related to the factors which had to be considered for homogeneity. When two group are involved, Smith et. al, emphasize the importance of making sure the groups are matched by selection criteria.

This IPA study explored the experience of six senior class students from a 1250-student, suburban high school in Western Massachusetts. Reflecting the recommendation of Smith, et. al (2009), participants shared in the experience of having completed three high school history courses. Three female students and three male students were selected. To address the homogeneity recommendations of Smith, et. al (2009) participants had average levels of academic achievement in history courses and in their overall academic program. Homogeneity will also be established by choosing students who were enrolled in standard, college- preparatory
history courses, as opposed to Advanced Placement courses or remedial, third-level courses. The study sought academic achievement homogeneity at an average performance level within each group for two reasons. First, because the study sought to uncover student experiences with different forms of curriculum, instruction and assessment, it was helpful to interview students who had some success and some struggles. Second, it limited the diversity of the sample and produced more opportunities for the researcher to make meaning of how the participants made meaning of their experience. A sample of students who only experienced success or regularly struggled would have produce a narrower range of answers to the study’s research questions. Average performance level in history courses was defined as students who have maintained a history grade point average (GPA) between 2.75 and 3.25 and an overall GPA in the same range.

**Recruitment and Access**

A single research site, a suburban high school in Western Massachusetts, was chosen to ensure that the participant experience was a shared one and because the researcher had access to the site as a district level administrator. Despite this position, it was necessary to solicit the support and help of “gatekeepers” who were in a position to refer or recommend students who fell within the sample population and who would be responsive in an IPA interview. These gatekeepers were high school guidance counselors and teachers with knowledge of student performance and who would have known if students had the interpersonal skills to engage in an IPA formatted interview. Creswell (2009) reminds us of the importance of informing gatekeepers of the scope, purpose and potential impacts of the study (Chapter 4, Ethical Issues in Data Collection section, para. 4).
Protection of Human Subjects

In order to protect the rights of student participants research was conducted with approval and under guidelines established by Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board. As research that was conducted on human subjects under the age of 19, great care was taken to protect participant rights and confidentiality. An informed consent form, outlining participant rights and protections, was obtained from each student. Creswell (2009) cites Sarantakos (2005) in identifying the elements that should be included in a properly developed informed consent form (Chapter 4, Ethical Issues in Data Collection Section, para. 2). These elements listed here will be in the informed consent form used in this study:

- Identification of the researcher
- Identification of the sponsoring institution
- Identification of how the participants were selected
- Identification of the purpose of the research
- Identification of the benefits for participating
- Identification of the level and type of participant involvement
- Notification of the risks to the participant
- Guarantee of confidentiality to the participant.
- Assurance that the participant can withdraw at any time
- Provision of names of persons to contact if questions arise

Several other ethical issues had to be addressed. As a district-level administrator for the research site, I needed to assure students that I was not conducting this study in my role as Superintendent. Explicitly, I needed to explain that I was interviewing them as a doctoral student from Northeastern University. Additionally, I notified each student’s previous history
teachers of the study and similarly assured them that the study was in no way evaluative or supervisory. Each teacher needed to understand the intellectual and practical goals of the study. Teachers took comfort knowing that my intent was to share the findings of the study. As practitioners, it was my hope that they would gain a deeper and broader understanding of the student experience, which in turn could strengthen their capacity to differentiate curriculum, instruction and assessment in ways that create learning environments and outcomes that are gender-equitable.

Student participants also benefited from this study. The interview process fostered within students a deeper understanding of their learning styles and interests by providing them with the opportunity to reflect upon and make meaning of their history class experiences. As they described pedagogical events that “worked” for them as learners, they seemed to gain more self-awareness and, perhaps, heightened feelings of academic self-efficacy. These benefits were significant as they helped create greater researcher-participant reciprocity, thus resolving an ethical dilemma that Creswell (2009) indicates exists when an asymmetrical relationship exists between researcher and participant (Chapter 4, Ethical Issues in Data Collection section, paras 8-10). Students also benefited from an interviewing protocol that puts them at ease in a comfortable, familiar location. Each student participant was also awarded a gift card to compensate them for their time and commitment.

The study did not anticipate any potential harm to student participants, but in-depth interviews inherently create an environment where stressful, sensitive information could be discussed or disclosed. The researcher was in a position to refer student participants to an appropriate school counselor if a harmful or dangerous experience or behavior was revealed. Participants were encouraged to discuss the interviews with their parents and teachers. There
was no expectation that the participants withhold the contents of the interview from peers, teacher or parents. Students were also protected by “member checking,” a process where the interviewer takes data, analyses, interpretations and conclusions back to the participant to check for accuracy (Creswell, 2009, p. 208). Interviews were conducted at times and locations that did not disrupt participant learning or the research site. Above all, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was closely guarded. In this study, participants were assigned a unique pseudonym that was be used throughout the study and in the final report. Finally, throughout the data collection and analyses period only the researcher had access to collected data.

Data Collection

To understand the experience of male and female high school history students “rich” data was collected through in-depth, unstructured, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews which captured participants’ perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Other interview techniques involving the telephone or electronic telecommunication were not employed because they present validity problems and are not normally associated with IPA research (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57). As a data collection method, IPA interviewing provides participants with an opportunity to “tell their stories, to speak freely and reflexively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). Interviews were conducted at the research site, a suburban high school in Western Massachusetts. To put participants at ease, in familiar a surrounding, interviews were conducted at the school library or in a classroom known to the student.

Data collection began by working with gatekeepers to identify and recruit participants for the study. Gatekeepers working at the site school were asked to nominate candidates who met
the sampling requirements described above. Six participants were sought for the study, but gatekeepers were asked to over-nominate in the likely event that a nominated student was unwilling or unable to participate or failed to provide informed consent.

The interviews took place in three stages. The first encounter was largely an opportunity for the researcher to explain and gain informed consent, discuss the purpose of the study, collect demographic data, and familiarize himself with the participant in an effort to establish the rapport necessary for a successful IPA data collection. At this stage, ice-breaker questions assisted with rapport building.

The second stage, the main opportunity for data collection, consisted of 45 to 90 minute interviews. Here, the researcher developed and followed an interview guide that included questions that reflected the primary research question, sub-research questions, the intellectual and practical goals of the study and the theoretical framework identified in Chapter Two. Given the open-ended, exploratory nature of IPA research, it was important to let the participants’ thoughts, feelings and experiences guide the conversation. Smith et al., (2009), emphasize the need for interviewer flexibility, noting the need to allow for “unexpected turns” that do not fit within the confines of the interview guide (p. 58). In an effort to elicit thoughts, feelings and experiences, rather than collect answers to questions, the researcher was prepared to go where the participant went with his/her responses. In short, the interview guide shaped the interviews, but it did not pre-determine the course of the conversation. Following the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009), the interview guide consisted of six to ten open-ended areas of inquiry.

The third stage of data collection involved member checking. Creswell indicates that member checking involves, “taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participant so they can judge the accuracy and the credibility of the account” (Creswell, 2007, p.
Stage three provided the researcher with another “sense-making” opportunity and served to bolster the validity of the data that was collected. The third stage of data collection also reflected the hermeneutic underpinnings of IPA research, where the researcher goes back and forth between the participant, the data and the emerging interpretation (Smith et al. 2009, p. 28).

Data collection was shaped and enhanced by the application of several principles and practices critical to successfully and validly interviewing within the qualitative tradition and IPA design. First, the interviewer needed to be actively engaged as a listener. Questions were not leading or reflective of the researcher’s prior understandings, beliefs and attitudes. To this end, it is critical for IPA researchers to explicitly identify and assess their positionality and “bracket off” their personal experience with the research topic. Creswell identifies bracketing as an important component of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Creswell, 200, p. 159). Second, participants were put at ease. This will was accomplished by maintaining eye contact, establishing an appropriate rhythm and pace, listening actively, assuring the participant that there are no right or wrong answers, being non-judgmental and ensuring the interviews are conducted in a comfortable, familiar setting with light snacks and water. Thirdly, following the direction of Creswell (2009), interview questions were broadly shaped by probing for “textual” descriptions where participants described what they experienced and “structural” descriptions where participants describe the setting and context of their experiences (Creswell, 2009, p. 159). Fourthly, to capture a verbatim record, to assist with transcription and heighten trustworthiness, interviews were digitally recorded using an unobtrusive computer device. Throughout the interview, the researcher took notes on the interview guide as a way to guide the development of follow up questions and to assist with future analysis and interpretation.
Data Storage

Full verbatim transcriptions of each interview were made by the researcher. The digital device used for audio-recording, along with the interview notes and transcriptions, are stored in a locked desk cabinet at the home of the researcher. Only the researcher will have access to data collected as part of this study. Throughout the study strict confidentiality was maintained. Participants were be assigned a pseudonym and will only be referred to by that name in any publication associated with this study.

Data Analysis

The analytic process employed by this IPA study closely followed the methodological recommendations of Smith et al. (2009). Relying on the work of Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) and Eatough and Smith (2008), Smith et al. (2009) outline an analytic process that assisted this researcher in making sense of participants making sense of their experience with their junior U.S. History class. The authors’ six-step analytic process guided the researcher from understanding the experiences of particular individuals to understanding the shared experiences of all participants. In the first stage of analysis transcriptions were read repeatedly and closely and audio-recordings were listened to closely.

Initial note taking began at the second stage. At this time consuming and highly exploratory stage, descriptive noting and interpretative noting took place. Descriptive noting focused on the explicit claims and descriptions made by the participants while interpretative comments were conceptual and reflected the first step in the researchers attempt to make meaning of the participants’ experiences. In Diagram 1, depicting the note taking template borrowed from Smith (2009) et. al., initial exploratory comments were recorded in the third column, with the original transcript, broken down line-by-line, filling the middle column.
At stage three of the process prescribed by Smith et al. (2009), the analysis sought “emergent themes” by closely analyzing the exploratory comments. At this highly interpretative stage, the analysis moved away from the original transcript and sought to reorganize and reduce exploratory comments. The validity of the interpretation at this stage is closely linked to the accuracy of the exploratory comments at stage two. The analysis at this stage is best described as an attempt to map “the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). The emergent themes developed at this stage occupied column one in the “theme table” shown in Diagram 2.

At stage four, the researcher searched for connections or patterns across these emergent themes. At all stages, but particularly at stage four, it was important to view the data through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory emphasizing the self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes of participants. Simple Microsoft Word tables will be developed to represent and record the emergent themes. Each emergent theme was linked back to an exploratory comment and a
component of the transcript. Linking the experience of the participants to the interpretatively
developed themes ensures that the “evidentiary base” is transparent and accessible to the
readers of the study (Smith, et al., 2009, 110).

The analytic process described in stages one through four was repeated for each
individual participant. Smith et al. (2009) identified this as stage five. Here the emphasis is on
“bracketing off” any understandings generated by interpreting and analyzing the transcriptions
and recordings of other participants. Each case must be approached inductively and openly with
no a priori understandings or conceptions. Stage six finalizes the analytic process by looking for
patterns across each participant case. The most compelling “super ordinate themes” must be
identified and illuminated. Similar to stage four, this master list of themes will be recorded in a
simple Microsoft Word Table with each super-theme linked to a pattern, which is explicitly
linked to an emergent theme which is explicitly linked to an exploratory comment and transcript
component.

At each stage the exploratory, open-ended nature of IPA research had to prevail. Though
this research was born out of a problem of practice relating to the differing experiences of boys
and girls in their high school history class, the research, the analysis and the search for super-
themes, patterns and emergent themes was allowed to take its own course. As the researcher
moved from the particular to the more general, it was conceivable that the super-themes
cautiously and carefully generated by this study using the process outlined by Smith et al.
(2009), would bring the researcher in unanticipated, unforeseen directions.

The data analysis procedures described above established a strong foundation for
communicating the results. Readers of this study can review results reported in a rich,
substantial narrative where the super-ordinate themes identified during the analysis stage are
reported sequentially. Descriptions of these super-ordinate themes are be supported and illustrated with extensive extractions from interview transcriptions.

**Trustworthiness**

The researcher’s adherence to sampling strategies, data collection procedures and the data analysis framework described above have enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of this IPA study. At the sampling stage, trustworthiness was enhanced by the purposeful selection of a homogeneous sample. This approach to sampling allowed the researcher to analyze patterns of convergence or divergence associated with the experience itself rather than some other demographic factor(s).

Trustworthiness was also established at the data collection stage. Smith et al. (2009) identified the importance of conducting a good interview. More specifically this involves “showing empathy, putting the participant at ease, recognizing interactional difficulties, and negotiating the intricate power-play where research expert meets experiential expert” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 180). Trustworthiness was also heightened at the data collection stage by the implementation of two strategies recommended by Creswell (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). The first, fundamental to IPA research, is “prolonged engagement” between the participant and the researcher. Prolonged engagement allowed rapport to be established, trust to be built and the experience of the student participants to be valued. The second is member checking, which occurred at the third encounter between the researcher and participants. This strategy was used to ensure that participants view the researcher’s data, interpretations and analysis as valid. Member checking increases the importance of employing sound data collection techniques. Accurate recordings, field notes or transcriptions were created to protect participants and
enhance the credibility of the entire study. Member checking also enhanced trustworthiness by placing the participant and the participants’ experiences at the center of the study.

At the data analysis stage, trustworthiness was enhanced by following the methodology endorsed by Smith et al. (2009). Close reading of transcripts, careful note taking and cautious theme development enhanced the validity of this IPA study. Citing the work of Lucy Yardley (2000), Smith et. al. indicate that trustworthiness can be established with rigor and commitment. Rigorous and systematic analysis moved back and forth between the participants’ experiences and the researcher’s understandings. The IPA methodology employed by this study ensures that readers can trace an explicit connection between super-ordinate themes, emergent themes, exploratory comments and the original words and thoughts of participants. Just as participants have the opportunity to member check, this study, by including extensive transcript extracts and rich, substantial descriptions, offers readers the opportunity to check the validity of the researcher’s conclusions. In short, trustworthiness was enhanced by the transparent and coherent link between the data and the researcher’s conclusion.

Limitations

As a study that provides a detailed examination of the experience of six students with their U.S. History class, this IPA study has the potential to offer powerful insights and could be a rich source of ideas for researchers and practicing history teachers. Still, several limitations must be noted. First, as an open-ended, highly inductive study, this research project may not illuminate the problem of practice that spawned this inquiry. In other words, given the tendency of IPA methodology to take researchers in unanticipated directions, we may be no closer to understanding why males and females experience different levels of success and engagement in their history classes at the conclusion of this study. Secondly, readers should understand that,
though generalizations are sought across participant cases, the findings may not be transferrable to other settings. The findings are associated with a single group of students from a single high school. The pedagogical techniques experienced by the participants may be unique to research site. Readers must consider the findings from the perspective of their own experiences, both personal and professional. Thirdly, readers should understand that as a highly interpretive approach, the quality and trustworthiness of IPA research is shaped by the researcher’s prior conceptions and understandings. This researcher made every effort to bracket off his prior experiences and any ideas about the topic he developed as a practicing administrator at the research site, as a former history teacher and as the parent of a high school aged student.

**Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, it is hoped that this IPA study will help researchers and practitioners gain a rich, phenomenological understanding of the male and female history class experience. As it reveals the essence of this experience, the study has the potential to provide history educators with a stronger working knowledge of male and female attitudes, beliefs and perceptions associated with different types of historical content, different approaches to instruction and different types of assessment. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the conversation, going on among academics and practitioners, on how males and females experience high school history and on how to eliminate gender based inequities or discrepancies in high school history classrooms.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological study was to explore the experience of three 12th grade male and three 12th grade female students with their 11th grade U.S. history class at a suburban school in Western Massachusetts. Specifically, the study sought to understand how male and female students make sense of their experience with a high school history class. The three female and three male participants, briefly profiled below, provided rich, detailed accounts through a series of semi-structured interviews regarding their experience with different types of historical content, different approaches to instruction and different types of assessment.

Participant Profiles

Amy. Amy is an engaging, motivated, involved and academically successful senior. At the time Amy’s involvement in this study commenced she had a 3.05 overall GPA and a 3.20 overall GPA in her high school history classes. She is three sport athlete, who in our first meeting said she “likes to be busy” and “gets bored quickly.” She is a very talented artist whose favorite subject is “English.” Amy has strong, generally negative feelings about high school history. Her specific recollections about content were very limited, almost non-existent.

Jody. Jody is an engaging, hardworking student who has enjoyed modest academic success in high school. At the time Jody’s involvement in this study commenced she had a 2.92 overall GPA and a 2.90 overall GPA in her high school history classes. In our first meeting Jody described herself as academically confident and successful in “everything but English.” Jody is one of two females at the research site who plays varsity ice hockey (the team co-ops with other area high schools). She has a future interest in studying criminal justice and law enforcement.
She had strong recollections of her history teacher and classroom assessments and lessons, but her recollections of specific content were less strong.

**Erin.** Erin is a polite and social student. She is a three sport varsity athlete with a strong record of community service. She described herself as an average history student with a “pretty good concept” of history. She is more interested in history and English than math and science. Her intention is to attend a four year liberal arts college. At the time Erin’s initial involvement in this study commenced she had a 3.20 overall GPA and a 3.25 overall GPA in his high school history classes. She was sometimes tentative with her responses, but has strong recollections of her experience with her teacher’s instructional practice and her experience with studying. She recalled some specific content.

**David.** David is an intellectually curious and engaging senior interested in pursuing a four-year college degree. He has enjoyed playing football and track and spends some of his free time weight training. In the first interview, David described himself as a highly “organized student” and more of a “math and science guy” than a history or English student. His recollection of his high school history experience was strong. In high school he has discovered a passion for computers. At the time David’s initial involvement in this study commenced he had a 3.25 overall GPA and a 3.10 overall GPA in his high school history classes. David’s recollections of high school history were vivid and he had strong opinions about what worked for him as learner in terms of content, instruction and assessment.

**Ron.** Ron is a polite and engaging senior in high school. He participates in cross country and track-and-field and is an Eagle Scout. His academic interests center on computer science or engineering, but in the first interview, Ron described himself as a Jeopardy guy who is “good” at history. As an Eagle Scout and through a field based environmental studies class he has
demonstrated a civic-minded approach to learning. At the time Ron’s initial involvement in this study commenced he had a 3.25 overall GPA and a 3.03 overall GPA in his high school history classes.

Rob. At the time Rob’s initial involvement in this study commenced he had a 3.12 overall GPA and a 3.2 overall GPA in his high school history classes. Rob is a talented and dedicated football player with plans to attend prep school before moving onto to college. Rob presented as a thoughtful and confident young man. His was firm in his statements and strong in his recollection of his experience with content, instruction and assessment. He intends to major in math in college, but says that history “kind of clicks with me.” Other than football, he has no involvement in high school extra-curriculars.

Findings

The semi-structured interviews with the participants above yielded four super-ordinate themes which are highlighted:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Highlights</th>
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| Learning and Achievement | • Each participant experienced or had strong feelings relating to the difference between achieving good grades and learning  
• Female participants perceived to be good at “doing school”  
• Male participants report experiencing higher levels of engagement and stronger experience with authentic learning |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Highlights</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>• Male participants reported higher levels of competence, involvement, interest and engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Female engagement, interest and involvement varied in relation to their feelings of competence and confidence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Content and Gender</td>
<td>• Males expressed a preference for studying war, conflict and the stories of famous Americans.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Females expressed a preference for social history involving the stories of ordinary Americans, particularly women.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• All participants expressed a greater interest in studying modern history</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• All participants expressed the belief that topics are not gender-neutral</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engaged and Enthused Teaching Practice</td>
<td>• Participants regardless of gender reported experiencing higher levels of engagement in class, more interest in the content of their class and more learning when they experienced and sensed that teachers were highly enthused with the topic of study or in them as learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher affect and enthusiasm was found to reduce disinterest and disengagement</td>
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Theme one centers on learning and achievement. Theme two relates to engagement. Theme three focuses on student experience with teacher enthusiasm. Theme four emphasizes the differences in the way male and female students experienced content of their classes.

**Theme One: Learning and Achievement**

Each student participant had experience or strong feelings with the difference between achieving strong grades and learning. Student voices relating to this theme were elicited by questions which encouraged participants to describe their experience with the various types of historical content, classroom activities, assessments and instructional techniques. In their own experience and in their estimation of others in their history class, female participants were good at “doing school” and achieving good grades. Female participants also reported their perception that their female peers were disengaged. Male participants reported experiencing higher levels of engagement and a stronger experience with deep authentic learning than female participants.

To Amy, history was a “blur.” She had significant difficulty describing or even recalling *anything* about what she learned or the content of her classes. She had tremendous difficulty describing any instructional unit. She stated twice that she “Definitely... didn’t Learn very much.” This contrasts with her view that she was “one of the smarter people in class.” Amy described the types of experiences that allowed her to learn little, but achieve good grades:

Like, book work and stuff. Like, when you have to, like, like, fill in the blanks kind of things. Um, like ... I think those that I don't learn anything, I just looked for the bold word, and I just write it in. You don't really learn much Yeah. I don't. Honestly, I don't mind that stuff at all. Like, I like the little busy work. And you have, like, a bunch of papers you had to fill them out or whatever, but I honestly don't learn I just liked getting it done.
In Amy’s experience it was not important for learning to be deep and lasting. Learning was about retaining content temporarily just long enough to take a test or complete an assignment. In describing her strategy to achieve good grades she stated:

Well, the open notes things. So you could honestly just copy down exactly what she [the teacher] had. And ... those are your answers for the test. Um. And ... like, you, like, learn stuff, and then you just, like, dump it. Like, you don't actually learn it. You just, like, hear it, and then it's, like, ‘Okay, on to the next thing.’ You're not paying any actual attention. Because it's, like, oh, like, that week ... Like, you learn whatever on your Power Point slide, and then, like, you have a test Friday. And it's, like, ‘Okay, I don't need to know that anymore.’

She chuckled nervously when she said, “I'm very good at copying the notes and doing the dump (chuckles).”

Erin’s experience was similar to Amy’s. Like Amy, Erin’s perception was that her grades exceeded her learning. Though she could recall more of the content of her class than Amy, studying involved rote memorization. Vocabulary lists and flash cards were her learning aids. She described the learning process in this manner:

It's easy to study the night or two before, just memorizing facts that aren't really being retained, it's just more like in your short term memory. And it's easy to just put them down on the paper the next day during a test then, then that's it. And um, the grades are usually result in like fairly good grades but didn't necessarily mean I retained anything…. probably test on it a week or two later, I'll probably won't be able to do it again.

Erin had an awareness that the drill and kill approach that resulted in good grades ultimately compromised her learning and affected her ability to make connections and see larger patterns in
history. She described her experience going through flash cards, power point slide and vocabulary lists “over and over” in this manner:

Um, a lot of just like going over slides and, uh, vocabulary, kinda like just going through it over and over again. And I felt like it kinda took away from like kinda getting the whole picture because I was kinda paying attention to more details that may be on the test. I feel like I was just kinda focusing on like smaller details, like I didn't really understand really what's going on in the whole, I guess the time period, I don't know.

Rob agreed that “cramming” as he described it, would result in good grades, but he did not believe it was a strategy he should employ (as Amy believed) or had to employ (as Erin believed). Rob was able to clearly articulate an experience with studying history that did not involve the forms of rote memorization that both Amy and Erin believed was inherently part of the history experience. While Amy and Erin both mentioned the necessity of using “flash cards”, Rob rejected their necessity. In his view, if one were an engaged, attentive and participatory learner one would achieve good grades. In his experience, “if you really like pay attention in class, you just really listen, you will do well in history.” Cramming and rote memorization were not part of his learning experience. In a statement that contrasts sharply with Amy and Erin, he stated, “I found when it came time to study that I knew most of the material.” He spoke dismissively of “making flash cards” and “trying to absorb everything the night before” because in his view if “you're going right up to the test pretty much, and then you do well on it but then, you know, a month from now, you're not really going to remember because you didn’t learn it over time. You just learned it in one night.” Rob’s rich, specific description of various units of study seemed to confirm that his approach that improved and deepened his learning. For example, when asked to describe a unit he found unengaging he mentioned the
“Industrial Revolution” and deftly describes it as a period of invention, urbanization and job clustering.

Jody’s experience while unique also illustrates how participants experienced a difference between deep learning and achieved grades. Similar to the other female participants, her recollection of specific instructional units or topics of study was very limited. She could broadly describe the “types” of history she enjoyed, but when asked if there were there specific topics or events or historical people that she found interesting, she replied, “No, not right now.” She had no lasting memories of any specific content. Yet curiously and confidently she defended her learning stating that the grades she received (overall grade of B) were a strong reflection of her levels of learning. To this point she stated, “Yeah, in History I think they were both pretty similar. Just, I don't know, 'cause, maybe 'cause I liked it more.” Similar to other male participants, Jody’s interest in subject resulted in an experience where, in her view, her learning matched her grades

David received a B in term one and a B+ in term two. He experienced deep and last learning. He was able to recall specific content including references to 1920’s gangsterism, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Federal Trade Commission. On three occasions he voiced an inclination to extend his learning beyond the expectations of his teacher or the boundaries of the class. When asked to describe an instance where his learning matched or exceeded the grades he received, he responded:

Um, I was pretty interested a case in that was, uh, the Cuban Missile Crisis. I ended up reading a book on it. It was, um, the Politics of Deception. I just found the whole thing that ... It was interesting how this huge thing was happening between the Soviet Union and the U.S. and John F. Kennedy had to keep everything quiet, you know?
He described his inclination to extend his learning by stating, “You know, as I got deeper, I found out more things and then I would branch off to different areas of that topic.” David expressed a perception that females, in his experience, focused on achievement, but males are motivated by content.

Ron, a B student in U.S. History, similarly valued learning over achievement. Ron had a very positive experience with a teacher that valued learning over grade acquisition:

My favorite teacher of all time is actually um is [name redacted]. And she really, um, encouraged the learning of things as opposed to the memorization of things. And I really liked that class a lot because it, it was what I just talked about basically. Instead of just focusing on getting good grades ... I feel like it was more on, um, it was more on learning the material.

Ron provided a clear, detailed and articulate account of his view that it was more important to learn history than it is to achieve high grades:

I think that one of the biggest things that is about school and everything is that there's some very different ways between learning the material and getting good grades. Like there's worlds difference between the two things. Uh, sometimes, obviously sometimes they overlap because you have to know the material to do well. But in some aspects, you don't necessarily have to do that.

He went on to say that in his view, females were better at “putting grades into the system.” When pressed on what he meant by this, he said he thought that females were better at memorizing and getting good grades. This was echoed by David who stated that girls, in his perception, were better at “retaining information” and “definitely good at achievement.”

Participant Erin also articulated the view that, in her experience, females were more adept at
earning higher grades because they took advantage of classroom grading routines. Cautiously, she stated,

“I mean, I don't know if this makes any sense, but girls are quietly higher achievers, whereas boys were like ... I don't know. Just more like ... They were like, were ... They spoke out more, but girls they kinda, probably in terms of like homework or classwork were probably higher achievers….boys may have learned more but didn't necessarily take the time to like apply [themselves] to tests, like I feel like their grades may have been a little lower just kinda generalizing it. Maybe they just didn't like the tedious work of memorizing the facts as much as girls.

Ron expressed his view that he learned from non-graded, authentic learning experiences. For example, he explained that in his experience debates provided him with an activity that enhanced his learning, but he noted that what one learns in a debate is “not something that you can be tested on.” In Ron’s experience a debate promotes authentic learning because:

it lets you see everybody's [idea] and you can argue with that person's opinion and eventually you can find like a really refined idea, somebody might have part of an answer. Somebody else might have another part of an answer ... And you can basically like merge two people's opinions together and get like one, one like very ... solid idea of what you're talking about.

He further stated in his view boys were more engaged in these important learning activities and they were “better” because, “they're louder and you can you can hear their voices.” Ron’s experience with debates in classroom also illustrates theme two, engagement.
Theme Two: Engagement

The most discernible difference between male and female students’ experience relates to reported levels of engagement. Several interview questions generated findings related to this theme [see Appendix A], particularly those that asked students to describe experiences when they felt engaged and enthused about class and to describe what they were doing, how they were feeling, what was the teacher doing. Students were asked about positive and negative experiences, their lasting memories and to describe a time where they felt motivated in class.

Male and female students had very different experiences with engagement. In describing their own personal experience, all three male participants reported high levels of competence, involvement, interest and engagement in class. The involvement, interest and engagement of female participants varied in relation to their feelings of competence and confidence. All female participants and all male participants except Rob reported that male students, in their experience, were more vocal, active, participatory and confident. All participants except Rob describe a history class experience where females were quiet and less affectively engaged.

As mentioned above, Ron felt most engaged during debates. He described his experience in rich terms:

Well there was a very little teacher interaction So you'd go like around in a big circle and that way, that way there's not a lot of interruption because like someone would speak and they give their idea and they choose the next person. It just flowed very well. The flow and the lack of interruption.

Jody echoed Ron’s sentiment that engagement was enhanced when learning was social and cooperative, but her experience was that males were more engaged in these situations because:
[boys] like don't care what they say, even if they mess up. Because they at least thought they knew more. And they always talked the loudest, too, so ... Or like, some, they like, like talking about history, so I feel like that played a role in them talking a lot, and stuff.

To Jody, confidence was a key factor in engagement. She explained that, “guys were actually more engaged because just usually guys are more confident and stuff, and like ask questions.” Jody believed that her female peers, “tended to be more shy.” To Jody engagement also had a direct impact on learning. The more engaged students tended to be boys and they, therefore tended to learn more. She explained, “The guys were kinda all engaged. I mean, there was a few that really weren't, but they were at least listening. And then girls, I don't ... Who knows what they were doing?” The perception that Jody had for her female peers’ experience was not her personal experience. In her view this was because she had the self-assurance and competence that her female peers lacked. “It's just the way I am. I don't really care what anyone says and I'm asking a question because either I don't understand it or I'm like, just, just asking.”

Despite her B average in history, Amy was rarely engaged in class. Her first comment about history was that, “It puts me to sleep.” She was consistently “bored” and spent countless hours trying to stay awake in class. Routines and busy work kept her engaged. Bookwork, fill-in the blank activities and copying notes prevented her from sleeping. She also commented twice that she would focus on her handwriting, trying to keep it neat or repeatedly tracing the same words. Similar to all other participants, Amy enjoyed group work, debates and cooperative learning. In Amy’s experience, and in the experience of all other participants, boys were perceived to be more engaged.
“Boys always just seem more knowledgeable about...all of that. For some reason...like, my brother...[he] is a history major. He absolutely loved it. I don't understand it at all. They know the answers to, like, absolutely everything.”

When asked what she was doing while the boys participated actively, she said she was just “zoning out.” Despite her sense that she had one of the higher grade point averages in her class, Amy did not experience the confidence that other participants indicated was a key to staying engaged and active in class. In fact she commented that at no time did she ever feel confident or competent about her skills or knowledge in history class.

Participant Erin provided rich, valuable descriptions her experience with engagement and confidence. Erin experienced moments where she was deeply engaged and other moments when she was not. Confidence, self-assurance and her affective state, were key determinants of Erin’s level of motivation and engagement. Erin, who spoke gregariously, but cautiously throughout the interviews, perceived herself to be a “pretty average history study” with a “pretty good concept of history” and “pretty average grades.” When asked how her teacher would describe her, she said he would “probably say I was paying attention.” Erin would participate if she knew she was going to be correct. Getting the answer right mattered to Erin. She stated that when the class was “talking about a topic that I felt like I knew pretty well, I'd be confident like to like discuss it in class, give my opinion.” Conversely, if she was not experiencing confidence she was “Kinda waiting to hear what everyone else had to say first before I give any input.” Her personal experience contrasts with her perception of her male student peers. In her perception boys would “answer more even if they weren’t correct.” She also reported that she experienced more success with “structured” discussions where the teacher was “waiting for someone to raise their hand.” In her view unstructured discussions lent themselves to the success of males. She
stated that, “When there was a lot more males I think it was definitely overrun and like kind of overpowered by the boys. Like, I think it caused the girls to not raise their hand as much. Um, the boys were more likely to just like blurt out answers and kinda like feed off of each other, in terms of just kind of like running the class.” In her experience this arrangement “caused girls I think to be less active and less like ... They participated less.”

Similar to other male participants, Rob experienced high levels of engagement and self-confidence in history class. He stated that he “never” felt discouraged, had no bad memories of history class and believed that his history teacher would describe him as a “good student who does his work, pays attention in class and likes to have fun.” When asked if he was good at history, he replied emphatically, “I am confident in my history skills.” Rob seemed to understand the importance of self-assurance. He stated, “If you're not confident, you're not just going to be able to perform, you know what I mean? Um, if you're confident in yourself, then, then you believe that you can do it. I mean if you're confident enough, you believe, so nothing’s going to stop you basically. So, you just believe in yourself and that’s it.”

David agreed with the other participants that males were more engaged, but did not cite confidence as the critical factor. For David, his engagement and his perception of his peers’ level of engagement was primarily function of the content of his history class. Males, in David’s perception were more engaged because “a lot of history in the past has to do with men.” In David’s experience he could “find more” to study. It was his belief that his female peers would naturally be less engaged in history class because “women are not represented as much” in history books. David’s experience here also illustrates theme three, Content and Gender.
Theme Three: Content and Gender

Super-ordinate theme three relates to the participants’ experiences with the specific content of their history classes. Several interview questions generated findings related to this theme [see Appendix A], particularly those that asked students to describe the historical figures, events, topics or time periods that were exciting to study and those that were, in their experience, boring. Participants were also asked if they thought history, as a subject was more interesting to boys or girls. Male and female participants experienced the content of their classes in very different ways and each gender identified specific, unique content-related preferences. Males expressed a preference for studying war, conflict and the stories of famous Americans. Females expressed a preference for social history involving the stories of ordinary Americans, particularly women. All participants expressed a greater interest in studying modern history more than earlier American history and all participants expressed the belief that topics are not gender-neutral – that there are topics that are of interest to male students and topics that are of interest to female students.

Amy who had a difficult time identifying any specific topic or event knew generally that she “liked the personal stories in history” more than “broad” or “overall kind of stories.” Amy stated that broad topics “don't amuse me at all.” She was clear that she was more engage by “the single experience” of a “specific” person. In her experience a personal story was more engaging and it could be used to “symbolize” the broader narrative of history. Though she admitted others could, she did not see the broader narrative as a story worth learning. In the few times that history was interesting, she experienced enjoyment from the stories of ordinary individuals struggling with “tragedy”, as in the holocaust [a topic that she identified from a senior social studies elective]. Amy emphatically stated that she believed the content of her
history class was more oriented to boys because “boys like war and all that stuff a lot more than girls do.”

Participant David spoke specifically and at length about the topics that were of interest to him and believed firmly some topics of study would be interesting to a male student while other topics would tend to engage females. In his experience, the topic of study in history class was the “biggest” factor in his engagement and learning, more certainly than the type of learning activities he participated. Among the topics he experienced as enjoyable were Prohibition-era gangsterism, the Cuban Missile Crisis and war. He enjoyed the “glamorous parts of history” as opposed to learning about the stories of ordinary Americans. When asked about a topic that he experienced as uninteresting he quickly stated,

The Depression. I didn't really like that. For some reason I like the glory and…I kind of like the stuff where people are flashing off and no one is like struggling or anything like that.

David perceived that there were topics that were specifically of interest to one gender or the other. He explained that the topics males and females found interesting “varies”: “Because I've definitely noticed things that I don't see as interesting to me but I look over and girls are having a ball with it, you know? I think the feminism coming up, I really saw a lot of girls looking at that and really being passionate about it, which I completely understand.” He described an experience where students were allowed to choose their own research topics during a unit on the 1920’s. He said, “I guess the difference between girls and guys in that assignment was that guys were more interested in like the gangsters and you know ... The girls would be interested in the flappers and different fashion.” In general, he perceived that the topics of his history class lent themselves to the success of males more than females because, as was noted above, he perceived
that “women are not represented as much [in the history books and classes]”  In his experience and memory “a lot of history in the past has to do with men.”  He believed that many of his female peers would not like studying gangsterism because “there weren't many female gangsters.”

Participant Ron expressed a preference for learning “modern topics” and new content:

For me specifically, there were certain topics that either I had already known and had, had been hammered through like all the years of history. And a lot of those points are very like drilled home and it's very like repetitive after awhile. You learn about the same people and the same events like ... the Civil War like we've been over everything that's happened over and over again. I think that when I'm learning new content I feel much more engaged in a class. Because it's, it's just more interesting. Because I feel like I can, I can lock into what we are doing and I can learn it as opposed to something that I think I have a handle on or I already know.

He further expressed a preference for studying economic history, great leaders, “eras” like the 1920’s. Ron cautiously suggested that history is “male-oriented” and that it tends to lend itself more to the learning and engagement of males:

“I feel like a lot of the topics really are interesting to males, like war and leaders and that sort of thing. Not saying that that can't be like interesting to females but like I feel like that's something that males are really interested in. Maybe it's something just hardwired, but I think that's what it is.

Like participant David, Ron experienced and articulated the relationship between one’s interest in the topic of study and one’s learning and engagement.
If you don't like the topic, you're not, I mean you're going to do well in the class, but you won't necessarily **learn** [emphasis by participant] it. So, maybe if the topic isn't of interest to either [gender], then you won't do, you won't get as good grades. And the fact that males are more interested in most of the topics taught leads me to believe that maybe they'd get better grades,

As noted, Ron and other participants expressed an interest in modern history and current events. Jody experienced success when the teacher linked history to current events. Jody reported increased learning and engagement in situations “when came into class, the first thing we did was write down a current event, so you, so [while] we're talking about…the past, you still have like, the current event, so you know what like happened, both times…” Erin concurred with Jody. She experienced success when her teacher used a current event to “start the class with, to like draw your attention to like the topic we're gonna talk about.” Additionally, Erin expressed an interest in history that has occurred “within the last 70 or 80 years” because it is more “relevant” and “relatable”

Like other female participants Erin expressed an interest in social history stating, “I would definitely be more interested in like the social movements over laws and politics…. like hearing like about the major movement, like the women's movement, labor movement, civil rights. Those interests me more so than like just worrying about like general laws.” If the topic of study was war she preferred “learning about like the lifestyle … of people living in the time of war….not necessarily about the soldiers but just like normal people.” Her experience watching the film Schindler’s List was a positive one. Erin believed that history, as a discipline is probably more interesting to male students “because there is more men….who have been like rulers and like leaders in history than woman. I mean like it's kinda changing obviously…”
When participant Rob was asked what topics he enjoyed studying, he firmly and quickly cited “Indian Removal” in the late 1800’, World War I, World War II. His specific interest in WWII did not center on the experiences of ordinary Americans on the homefront. Rather, he expressed an interest in learning about “the causes, the conflicts, like with the Nazis and … the Japanese and the conflicts between the US and everybody.” In contrast to Erin’s interest in watching Schindler’s List, Rob had a very positive experience watching Saving Private Ryan. When asked if he preferred learning about ordinary Americans or famous Americans, he commented, “Probably famous individuals just because they’ve had more of an impact. You can just learn more...” Current events and modern history were also important to Rob. More specifically, he enjoyed learning about the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent war in Iraq. In his experience there “might” be only a subtle difference between the topics of interest to male and female students. In relation to this he stated, “I think it really just depended on like the topic. So maybe boys would like this topic more or girls would like this topic more. It really kind of just depended on their interests.”

**Theme Four: Engaged and Enthused Teaching Practice**

When participant Ron cautiously expressed his impression that history is “male-oriented” and that it tends to lend itself more to the learning and engagement of males, he qualified his statement by saying that it might depend “on the way [the topic] is approached.” This important qualification highlights the fourth super-ordinate theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews of the six high students, more specifically that participants regardless of gender participants reported experiencing higher levels of engagement in class, more interest in the content of their class and more learning when they experienced and sensed that teachers were highly enthused with the topic of study or in them as learners. It should be noted that the
interview guide was not structured to give participants a way to voice how teacher passion and zeal shaped their experiences. In the spirit of IPA style research, the researcher let participant responses guide the conversation and allowed the participants express their thoughts, feelings and experiences in this area. This finding represented was one of “unexpected turns” that are often found in IPA research.

As noted earlier participant Amy experienced significant boredom and had a difficult time identify topics of study that were of interest. In the earliest interview she was able to recall that she enjoyed studying “women progressing.” Later she made it clear that her engagement on this topic related to the enthusiasm of the teacher. She stated that, “The teacher I had was all about women's rights, so ... Her reaction was also amazing.” She went on to say that in the few instances when she was interested, “... I think it goes back to the teacher. Like, if they're ... If they're animated about the subject, or, like, tell it ... Like, they, they tell us a story basically. And tell it, like, the right way....Oh, like, obviously, like, jokes help a lot.” Amy like other participants mentioned that the teacher’s mannerisms, tone of voice and energy level affected her experience. She described an engaging experience this way:

Um, I don't know, the way ... like, a teacher, like, speaks about a topic. Definitely changes, like, my perspective on it. Like, if it's someone just reading off, like, a Power Point slide, like, monotone as could be. Then I absolutely will not pay attention. But if they're animated, like, to say the least, then ... Yeah, it's more interesting.

She came back to this point later in interview 3 when she said, “I think I already say this, but, like, the way they [teachers], like ... They talk about the, like, material, helps me learn a lot.”

Unfortunately, Amy did not experience a strong connection with her history teacher. When the researcher asked her how her teacher might describe her she said,
“I don't know. I don't even think she'd remember my name. It was really ... I was such a bore in class No. And, like, I do stand out in some of my classes. I know I do. But history I just, I don't have any desire to do such a thing (laughing).

Conversely, participant Jody’s enjoyed a positive connection with her junior year history teacher and one that kept her engaged and involved in class. When asked if she experienced engagement in class she enthusiastically stated:

Yeah yeah, last year actually, engaged a lot, just 'cause like, I was comfortable with the teacher. 'Cause I had him like, the semester before for a different class. Yeah, usually just kinda get to like know each other, like he liked sports and stuff, so there's like similarities that we have. So every day he would ask how it was or something. So he like showed that he cared about students, too.

A positive connection with her teacher was also an important positive experience for Erin. Her “most memorable experience” from history class was when “our teacher played his guitar and sang with the class, like very unhistory related. ... I mean, it kind of like showed who he was more.” Erin shared the view of other participants when she stated that any topic “can kinda be interesting depending on how the teacher explains it or presents it.” Like other participants, Erin experience with a teacher’s energy level was important. She appreciated when her teacher was “more upbeat about the topic.” She reported that she “retained more” because “she remembered their enthusiasm.” She juxtaposed this experience with her experience with “teachers who just kinda stand there and read the slides.” Erin was more engaged when her teacher “looked for different ways to kinda present the information looking for different clips, movies, pictures, not necessarily just like [definitions] and PowerPoint.”
Participant Ron repeatedly expressed a strong preference for listening to teacher presentation particularly more than presentations from his peers. He reported that it was very difficult for him to “learn off of other [students’] presentations. He worried that students would “miss a lot of things that were very important.” In Ron’s experience enthusiastic teachers were more interesting than student presentations. He could “trust” what the teacher said and he believed that “when you have the teacher you have a consistent teaching style and a consistent presentation style.” Students, meanwhile, could make an interesting topic “very boring.”

Participant David, who in each interview cited content as an important factor in engagement, thoughtfully explained how, in his experience, his teacher’s passion could overcome topic boredom. He explained,

Well I think definitely a thing that would do that for me was some of my teachers, they would just be blown away at certain subjects and certain things that would happen and I think the way they show that they're extremely interested in it makes me excited that ... into that same topic. I guess I get feedback off of their, uh ... their mannerisms and stuff like that. [When teachers were not enthused] I wouldn't be engaged in it, so I'd be daydreaming and I wouldn't think that it would be as important.

When asked to describe his most lasting positive memory from junior year history, David, the participant who was most focused on the historical content during the interviews, answered in manner that highlights the important role that a teacher’s personality played in the experience of participants. He stated that his strongest memory was of the “personality of the teacher. There's definitely a few situations where I just thought it was hilarious.” His statement about hilarious situations echoes Amy’s comments about the importance of jokes as a way to heighten engagement.
Humor was also important to Rob. When asked what his most lasting memory of history class was, he stated, “I think it was just Mr. [name redacted] already because he’s a funny guy and he likes to tell jokes and stuff and goof around. He connects with the students very well. I think it was just his personality that I will remember, you know what I mean?” Rob reported that it was important for his teacher to keep learning “fun.” Like other participants Rob experienced more engagement, interest and learning when his teacher “showed real interest for the topic” and “enjoyed teaching it to the students.”

**Summary**

Themes one, two and three illustrate a difference in the experience of male and female participants. Theme one demonstrated that, in the experience of the participants, female students were perceived to be more inclined to focus on rote learning techniques than males. Theme two showed that the participants’ topical interests broke down along clear gender lines. Theme three illustrated the interplay between confidence, engagement and gender with male students experiencing higher levels of engagement. Theme four illustrates a common experience. Theme four illustrates that, for both male and female participants, their teacher’s interest in them as students and their teacher’s enthusiasm for the lesson were significant factors in heightening their sense of engagement and their academic success. The teacher’s affective state helped male and female participants experience greater levels of engagement and learning and helped male and female participants overcome their disinterest in a topic. It is important to re-emphasize that the themes were generated from the unique experience of a group of participants from a single research site. In other words, the themes are applicable the experience of students at this one high school and are not inherently transferrable to other settings.
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

Restatement of Purpose

Scholarship and the experience of this research as a practitioner have confirmed that male and female students perform differently and are differently engaged by their history classes. The gender-based discrepancies revealed by these studies represent a significant problem of educational practice. As an academic discipline, history nurtures American ideals and shapes our national and individual civic identities. As such, it is vital that every student, male and female, experience history in engaging, meaningful, challenging and thought-provoking ways. It is equally important in today’s educational climate that teachers understand each individual learner. Teaching practice must respond to the unique needs and interests of both male and female students.

The primary research question this qualitative study explored was: How do male and female students make sense of their experience with a high school history class? Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the researcher explored and attempted to make sense of participants making sense of their experience with a high school history class. Open-ended, exploratory interviews yielded information about the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of the participants and allowed the researcher to seek and identify themes and patterns in the manner prescribed by IPA research.

Social Cognitive Learning Theory, with its emphasis on self-efficacy, provided a useful intellectual lens and theoretical framework through which to study the experience of males and females with high school history. Consistent with the orientation of Social Cognitive Learning Theory, the findings demonstrate that males and females have different self-beliefs regarding their confidence and competence in history and that they cognitively process their history
experience differently and that these differences powerfully influence their achievement, learning and engagement.

**Summary of Findings**

The findings of this study provide educators and the research community with a phenomenological understanding that the experience of males and females differ markedly. Four super-ordinate themes were identified:

1. **Learning and Achievement:** In their own experience and in their estimation of others in their history class, female participants were good at “doing school” and achieving good grades. Female participants also reported their perception that their female peers were disengaged. Male participants reported experiencing higher levels of engagement and a stronger experience with deep authentic learning than female participants.

2. **Content and Gender:** Male and female participants reported differing levels of interest in various forms of historical content. Each gender identified specific, unique content-related preferences. Males expressed a preference for studying war, conflict and the stories of famous Americans. Females expressed a preference for social history involving the stories of ordinary Americans, particularly women.

3. **Engagement and Gender:** Male and female students had very different experiences with engagement. Male participants reported high levels of competence, involvement, interest and engagement in class. The involvement, interest and engagement of female participants varied in relation to their feelings of competence and confidence. All female participants and all male participants, but one, reported
that male students, in their experience, were more affectively engaged, vocal, active, participatory and confident than female students.

4. Engaged and Enthused Teaching Practice: Participants regardless of gender reported experiencing higher levels of engagement in class, more interest in the content of their class and more learning when they experienced and sensed that teachers were highly enthused with the topic of study or in them as learners. This finding represented was one of “unexpected turns” that are often found in IPA research.

The findings yielded by each super-ordinate theme are discussed below.

**Findings Relating to Historical Content**

Existing research has demonstrated that there are discrepancies in the type of historical content that appeals to male and females (NCES, 2010 and College Board, 2002). These studies concluded that that males tend to perform better on items relating to relating to conflict, politics, and the time period after World War II, while females tend to perform better on items relating to social and cultural history including the history of women and marginalized groups.

The topics where male and female performance was higher in these studies correlate strongly to the topics that engaged and interested the participants of this study. The findings of this classroom-level, phenomenological study confirm that males and females have a different experience with the historical content and strongly complement and enhance these two important studies.

Female participants expressed that they were more engaged by social history involving the stories of ordinary Americans, particularly women. Females expressed interest in studying social movements relating to organized labor or civil rights and the struggles or lifestyles of common Americans. Male participants were generally more specific about the topics that
interested them and expressed a preference for studying war, conflict and the stories of famous Americans. Gangersterism, the Cuban Missile Crisis, economic history, great leaders, Indian Removal, and both World Wars were some of the topics that were mentioned.

A consideration of the direct contrast between the experience of some male and female participants helps further illuminate the correlation between the findings of this study and existing literature. While Amy expressed an interest in studying ordinary people “struggling,” David specifically mentioned his disinterest in the Great Depression and said he was more interested in studying the “glamorous” parts of history. When asked about studying WWII, Erin expressed interest in studying the American homefront and watching her favorite history movie, Schindler’s List, a film that depicts the horrors of the Holocaust. Rob, meanwhile, mentioned his interest learning about the Nazis and the battles of World War II. He had a very positive experience watching Saving Private Ryan, a film that graphically depicts WWII combat.

All participants expressed a greater interest in studying modern history more than earlier American history. This phenomenon has not been identified or studied in extant literature.

The findings of this study also enhance studies that have considered whether history as an academic discipline is more male-oriented or female-oriented. All participants expressed a view that topics are not gender-neutral – that there are topics that are of interest to male students and topics that are of interest to female students. No participant expressed the belief that historical content would generally be more interesting to females. Five of the participants in this study shared a perception that history would generally be more interesting to males. The reasons were that “women were not represented as much in the past”; that there “have been more male leaders and rulers”; that “boys like ware and all that stuff more.” Participants believed that the subject would likely be of more interest to males because, in their view, males figure more
prominently and frequently in history. In short, participants experienced more “maleness” in the past. The findings here confirm Chapin (1998) who found that males have a more positive view of history. The findings also add to a study by Fournier and Wineburg (1997) who found that when students were asked to draw a picture of a historical figure, they showed an inclination to draw male figures.

While the findings on the participants’ experience with historical content confirm or complement existing literature, many questions remain unanswered. It is inherently difficult to transfer the findings of IPA studies to other settings and the study does not explain why male and female students expressed different interests in historical content or why they hold the perception that history is more male oriented. While it would be difficult to untangle the influences that have created these beliefs, practitioners and scholars would benefit from having a stronger understanding of why male and female students respond differently to historical content. The student voices in this study also do not tell us what could be done to promote stronger male interest in social and cultural history and stronger female interest in military and political history. Additionally, it should be noted that while the participants perceived that their interest in a topic affected their performance, the study did not explore whether these interests affected actual performance. We can cautiously conclude, however, that the differences between male and female participants matter because the College Board (2002) and NCES (2010) have demonstrated that the differing interests of males and females translate into performance differences.

Viewing the participants’ experience with historical content through the lens of Social Cognitive Learning Theory illuminates the significance of the study’s findings in this area. Social Cognitive Learning Theory encourages us to understand the powerful relationship
between self-beliefs and perceptions and motivation, engagement and persistence. If female students perceive or, in the words of Ponteretto, they have constructed a reality that history is generally male oriented, then they will cognitively process history class, history instruction, history texts differently (Ponteretto, 2005, p. 129). Social Cognitive Learning Theory suggests that if this occurs then it is likely that they will be less affectively engaged, less inclined to view the subject matter as important and less persistent in their efforts to master the material. Males might be similarly predisposed on topics they view as “female.”

The participants’ experience with historical content clearly influenced, but did not fully explain the participants experience with engagement. In terms of this experience, “something else was going on.”

**Findings Relating to Engagement**

Male and female students had very different experiences with engagement. In describing their own personal experience, all three male participants reported high levels of competence, involvement, interest and engagement in class. The involvement, interest and engagement of female participants varied in relation to their feelings of competence and confidence. All female participants and all male participants except Rob reported that male students, in their experience, were more vocal, active, participatory and confident. All participants except Rob describe a history class experience where females were quiet and less affectively engaged.

Outside of the research referred to above that examined students’ engagement with the content of their history classes, this researcher did not uncover any existing literature on the engagement of high school history students with classroom instruction or classroom learning. Wallace (2006) and Skelton (2010) did examine engagement relative to achievement, but not in a history class setting. As such the research findings here add a new scholarly perspective on
experience of males and females in a history class. The findings also confirm my experience as a history teacher early in my educational career when I sensed that female students did not seem as enthusiastically engaged as their male counterparts.

The significance of the findings to the research community and practicing educators is heightened when considered within the framework of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Learning Theory. In Social Cognitive Theory, an individual’s cognitive responses, behaviors, and environment work together in “triadic reciprocality” to create learning (Pajares, 2005, p. 304). In this model, students can construct a self-belief that they can learn if they have personally or vicariously experienced mastery. In Social Cognitive Theory, this belief that one can master a task is called self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can also be constructed if individuals receive effective verbal persuasion from others and when one’s affective state is appropriately aroused (Miller, 2011, pp. 244-245). Bandura and other Social Cognitive theorists have established the powerful connection between feelings of self-efficacy and academic performance.

The research findings suggest that female history students might be bound by an educational catch-22 where low levels of self-efficacy create disengagement and disengagement, in turn, reduces opportunities to construct self-efficacy. One factor seems to be negatively perpetuating the other. All the female participants and all except one male participate expressed a view that girls are less active and engaged. In the voices of the participants, boys don’t care “if they mess up;” girls tend to be “more shy;” boys seem “more knowledgeable;” girls “participate less;” boys “know the answer to everything;” boys were perceived to be “running the class.” In Jody’s view the males were “all engaged” and she expressed exasperation with her female peers by saying, “Who knows what they were doing?” In moments of insecurity, Erin was “waiting to hear what everyone else had to say first” before she spoke.
If female history students are as reticent as depicted by the study’s participants, then an important avenue for females to construct self-efficacy is absent. More specifically, females, at least those in this study, appear not to have peer role models. In Bandura’s framework, this means that vicarious experiences, where female students have opportunities to build self-efficacy by observing and imitating successful female peers, are lacking. In other words, females who do not see successful female peers are missing opportunities to build confidence and, ultimately, competence. For female students, like Jody, who do not lack confidence, this phenomenon may not be debilitating, but for students like Amy, who indicated she never experienced any confidence in her history class, a lack of active, confident female peers will be further defeating.

Conversely, if male students are as active, vocal, participatory and engaged as the study depicted, then we can conclude that male students have more opportunities to develop self-efficacy through their observation and imitation of successful peers. Rob’s captured the power of self-efficacy as well as Albert Bandura when he stated,

“If you're not confident, you're not just going to be able to perform, you know what I mean? Um, if you're confident in yourself, then, then you believe that you can do it. I mean if you're confident enough, you believe, so nothing’s going to stop you basically. So, you just believe in yourself and that’s it.”

There may be additional ill effects for learning associated with the engagement findings of this study. For example, we can reasonably conclude that, in addition to diminishing opportunities to build self-efficacy, the disengagement of female history students may work to perpetuate the notion that history is male-oriented subject. Young learners will normalize a history learning experience that is dominated by active, vocal males and come to believe that a history discussion is a male activity.
The findings of this study relative to the engagement experience of male and female history students provide fertile ground for additional research. The findings here justify additional inquiry into the engagement phenomenon. Inquiry should focus on further untangling why males and females appear to experience differing levels of engagement and should investigate if or how these differences correlate to performance differences. Because participants were homogeneously selected the study did not yield findings on actual performance differences.

Though the study’s findings relating to engagement justify further research, the results should be taken with caution. Inherently IPA generated findings cannot be transferred to other settings since they are based on the unique personal experience and perceptions of participants. The findings should not be generalized. Nevertheless, the rich descriptions provided by the participants combined with the researcher’s personal experience and some extant literature on engagement provide a strong enough basis for additional study.

**Findings related to Learning and Achievement**

The study’s semi-structured, in-depth interviews yielded significant findings relating to the dichotomy the participants experienced between the tasks required to achieve good grades and the skills and commitment required to achieve deep, authentic learning. Each participant was able to articulate a belief that, in their experience, good grades did not always equate to lasting learning.

For the two least confident participants, Amy and Erin, learning history meant regurgitating facts in order to get acceptable grades. In their experience, their grades were average to above average, but their actual learning was more limited. To, Amy learning was about retaining content just long enough to pass a test. In Erin’s experience history involved rote
memorization. Jody, the more confident female, felt her level of mastery learning matched her achievement.

The male participants all valued learning over achievement, felt their learning exceeded or matched the grades they received and had strong recall of the topics they studied in class. Rob dismissed the value of “cramming” and other rote learning strategies; David spoke passionately about going “deeper” into topics than his teacher required; Ron spoke enthusiastically about the “exploration” that happens when one is engaged in research and also about a teacher who encouraged authentic learning over covering what was going to be on a test.

When asked, in their view, about the relative value males and females placed on learning and achievement, several participants stated that girls were more adept and more inclined to apply to the sort of lower level cognitive skills that might assist a student in passing a test, but would not result in lasting, authentic learning. Erin said girls are “quietly higher achievers;” Ron said girls were better at “putting grades into the system;” David thought that females were better at “retaining information” and definitely better at achievement. No participant believed that males were more apt to emphasize rote memorization techniques than females.

The findings in this area may shed phenomenological light on macro-level studies that have found that:

- the grade point average of female high school students are on average, 0.21 points higher than their male counterparts.
- females earn 0.1 more high school credits in social studies than male students.
- Males outperform females on the history portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010).
Despite the generalizability limitations associated with IPA research, the findings of this study suggest a possible explanation for these nationally identified performance differences. Female students in this study prioritized rote memorization over approaches to learning that resulted in authentic, deep learning. If female students in other settings generally approach history this way, then we have a possible explanation of why females nationally seem to achieve higher grades and more credits than male students. The study suggests that if female students are more generally oriented toward short-term learning routines, of the sort that result in good test grades, then we can reasonably conclude that they are doing what it takes to achieve higher grades and more credits, but not enough to match male performance on standardized tests. Similarly, if male students in other settings employ techniques that embed learning in deep, lasting ways the way male students in this did in this study, then we have a possible explanation of why males nationally outperform females on standardized tests. The findings of this study make it reasonable to speculate on whether males are more generally oriented toward mastery learning and if this approach to learning history correlates to higher standardized test grades. What is not clear from the study is why the male participants were more oriented this way. We do not know if this disposition was the result of socialization or other influences.

The findings relating to learning and achievement simultaneously support and complicate existing scholarship that has attempted to establish a correlative relationship between gender and academic performance. To the extent that the findings illustrated that female students perceived themselves and their female peers to be quieter and less engaged than their male peers and to the extent that female participants reported an inclination to be more focused on busy work (note taking, memorization, recall) than mastery learning, the findings strongly confirm the work of Wallace (2006) who concluded that girls are better at doing school or playing the school game.
and they understand how to earn higher grades even if they are less engaged. The findings echo the work of Downey and Yuan (2005) who concluded that appropriate classroom behavior was an important component of female academic success as measured by course grades. Downey and Yuan’s (2005) description of females as better school citizens than males is partially confirmed.

The findings relating to the achievement of males and their approach to learning neither confirm, nor refute extant literature. The more inappropriate classroom behavior of male students that Downey and Yuan (2005) studied was not part of the experience or perception of study participants. Similarly, the findings neither confirm, nor refute the existence of what existing literature and the popular press has labeled the “boy crisis” where girls outperform boys and have fewer disciplinary referrals. (Kafer, 2007; Sax, 2008; Clark, Flower, Walton, Oakley, 2008; Burns and Bracey, 2001; Clark, Lee, Goodman and Yaco, 2008). Male participants did not voice this as part of their experience or the experience they perceived for their male peers and female participants did not perceive or observe male underachievement. This is not surprising, however, given that homogenous male and female participants were purposely selected and the interviews did not explicitly explore this phenomenon.

The findings of Skelton (2010) and Skelton, Francis and Read (2010) are partially confirmed. Similar to the findings in this report, these studies concluded that females are more anxious and less confident than their male peers even though they achieve higher grades. These researchers’ explanation that females are forced to conform or hide their intelligence is not explicitly found in the experience of the participants. Though this factor cannot be conclusively ruled out, it was not voiced as part of the participant experience or perceived by the participants to be the case for other students.
Though participants did not report that they experienced prejudice or perceived themselves to be bound by gender-based stereotypes, there is enough evidence of gender specific responses to teaching and learning to encourage research on history education within a Critical Theory Framework. We have no way of truly knowing from this IPA study, conducted within a Social Cognitive Learning framework, if gender based stereotypes and prejudices influenced the experience of the participants or their perceptions of their peers. It could be that the participants in this study held some of stereotypes about gender-based performance and achievement patterns that Brown (2007) and Plantea et al (2009) identified. Educational practitioners and the research community would benefit from studies that examine stratification of behavior along gender lines in a history classroom. Observational studies could be employed to further study if students are forced to conform to stereotypes in the manner suggested by Skelton, et. al.

The importance of the findings on the dichotomy the participants’ experience between getting good grades and deep learning are underscored and more easily understood when viewed through the lens of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Learning Theory. Social Cognitive Theory helps us understand that the reason female students gravitated to simple, lower-level studying techniques was to experience mastery. They learned that if they could master the tasks of memorization and recall that they would experience success in the form or good grades. Unfortunately, this level of task achievement did not build the type of self-efficacy that the female students needed to stay fully engaged and participatory. They appeared to benefit from grading systems that rewarded them with feelings of competence, but not confidence in their ability to truly and authentically master history. Given that the least self-efficacious students, Amy and Erin, had the greatest difficult recalling or describing the content of their history
classes it is reasonable to conclude that there was a correlation between self-efficacy and genuine, deeply-held learning. The opposite is also true. The most self-efficacious students had the easiest time recalling or describing the content of their classes. The Social Cognitive Learning Framework helps us understand that in the experience of participants deep, lasting learning was undermined and true self-efficacy was not developed because female students could achieve success, in the form of grades, without “enhancing intensity and persistence of effort” (Bandura, 1977, p. 212).

As with other findings, the conclusion of this study in relation to learning and achievement must be viewed with caution. To begin, Social Cognitive Learning theory reminds us that the participants’ experiences are the result of unique personal, behavioral and environmental factors. We also know that findings generated by an IPA methodology are not automatically generalizable. As such, we cannot validly conclude that the experiences of participants in this study are generally applicable in other educational settings. However, an IPA study’s theoretical findings are potentially transferrable (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, p. 51, 2009). Given this, the phenomenon discovered by this study relating to the dichotomy the participants experienced between true learning and achievement is worthy of further scholarly consideration.

Findings Relating to Engaged and Enthused Teaching Practice

Participants, regardless of gender, reported experiencing higher levels of engagement in class, more interest in the content of their class and more learning when they experienced and sensed that teachers were highly enthused with the topic of study or in them as learners. This was a highly unexpected finding as the primary research questions and the interview guide were
not structured to elicit student perceptions in this area. IPA research allows for these unexpected turns (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, p. 58, 2009).

Participants provided rich, detailed descriptions of teachers who they experienced as enthusiastic and energetic. All participants valued teachers whose energy level was high, who were animated (as opposed to being monotone in delivery), funny, hardworking, passionate about their subject and interested in them as a learner and person. The findings strongly suggest that enthusiastic teaching promotes topic interest, genuine learning and lesson engagement for all students. We can conclude that for these participants teacher enthusiasm modified differences and inequities in the experience of male and female history students.

This finding represented was one of “unexpected turns” that are often found in IPA research. This seems to be an area worthy of additional research as a literature review did not turn up any specific studies relating to student experiences with teacher enthusiasm in history classroom.

This finding further confirms the value of studying the high school history experience within a Social Cognitive Learning Framework. In this study, the physiological or affective state of the participants was proven to be powerful influence on their experience. Consistent with Social Cognitive Learning Theory the participants’ level of excitement raised their feelings of engagement and competence. (Miller, 2011, pp. 244-245). Positive or heightened teacher affect was found to raise student affect in ways that promoted learning.

As with other findings, the conclusions relating to teacher engagement should be applied cautiously. We cannot generalize the experience of the study participants to students in other settings. The findings are unique to the experience of the participants. However, the prominence
of this theme certainly suggests the need for additional research into teaching practices that positively influence students’ affective states.

**Findings Relating to Participant Experience with Assessment**

While sub-research questions relating to participant experience with the content and instruction yielded robust super-ordinate themes and the significant findings described above, the sub-research question relating participant experience with *assessment* did not contribute to any super-ordinate theme or yield any finding that related to existing literature, or that suggested the need for additional research or that would be helpful to practicing educators. Participants were asked to describe their experience with assessments that allowed them to be successful or caused them to struggle. Students provided rich and detailed description of their experiences with multiple choice tests, open-ended tests, research projects and quizzes, but their experiences were found to be highly individualized. There were no themes relating to assessment that emerged across genders or across the entire participant sample.

**Recommendations for Practicing Educators**

The practical goal of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was to help history educators understand how males and females make sense of their experience with high school history class in order to promote teaching practices and curriculum designs that equitably promote the achievement of male and female students. In this regard the findings are valuable. Several recommendations stand out, but are offered with an understanding that IPA findings are only theoretically transferrable. The specific experience of the participants may not be transferrable to other settings.

Fundamentally, the findings remind practicing educators that gender matters — that gender predicts experience. The study confirms, at a fundamental and theoretical level, that
educators and educational institutions have a duty to understand the male and female experience, to disaggregate achievement and performance data along gender lines and to differentiate content and instruction with the unique needs and interests of male and female students in mind.

More specifically, the study has yielded six specific recommendations for educators.

1. History teachers are reminded that their affective state may have powerful effect on the engagement of learners. The study reminds teachers to approach their craft with energy, passion and commitment. When the participants in this study experienced teacher enthusiasm, their engagement and interest increased regardless of gender. Additionally, educators are encourage to understand that they can positively influence a student’s affective state, and by extension his/her learning, if they demonstrate a personal interest or work to make personal connections.

2. The study suggests that educators should avoid building grading models that allow for student success in the form of grades, but do little to build feelings of self-efficacy or intellectual satisfaction. Educators are encouraged to recognize instances, illustrated vividly in this study, where students seek mastery experiences in simple tasks or rote memorization rather than challenging, authentic work. Students, particularly females, should be provided with opportunities to build self-confidence and competence in authentic learning situations.

3. Educators should develop a working knowledge of their students’ attitudes, beliefs and perceptions. Social Cognitive Learning Theory and the findings here have demonstrated how these factors influence and shape engagement and performance (Miller, 2011, p. 244). The study serves as a strong reminder to educators that their students’ perceptions of their ability to succeed matter greatly. Practitioners need to understand their male and
female students’ concepts of self-efficacy given that efficacy expectations “influence performance by enhancing intensity and persistence of effort” (Bandura, 1977, p. 212).

4. It is recommended that history teachers understand the topical interests of their students and work to differentiate content as a way to engage both genders equally. Existing research and this study’s findings confirm that educators should, to the extent practicable, build instruction around topics that promote engagement and self-efficacy. Teachers need to be cognizant that their male and female students might be differently engaged by the content of their history classes. This is not to suggest that male students should be provided topics that this study and existing literature confirm to be topics typically of interest to males. Rather, teachers should explore ways to engage students in topics that they might not be predisposed towards. Speaking generally, it is important that males not routinely disengage from social history and the stories of ordinary Americans and it is important for adolescent female students to see the relevance of political and military history.

5. Teachers should develop classroom routines and practices that ensure opportunities for males and females to participate equally in classroom activities, particularly discussions. Participants in this study reported that female students, in their experience, were often quieter and less apt to participate in a very active debate or discussion. Teachers are encouraged to employ wait time, written prompts, and other approaches to ensure that quieter, perhaps less self-efficacious students have ample and genuine opportunities to participate.

6. Educators and administrators should schedule and group students to ensure that female students have gender peers who serve as models of engagement and interest. All the
female participants in this study reported that their female peers were disengaged.

Bandura’s framework and this study remind us that learning is a social event where children learn and build self-efficacy by observing and imitating the behavior of role models (Miller, 201). Effective scheduling and grouping will ensure that female students have opportunities to learn vicariously from self-efficacious female peers.

**Limitations**

The intellectual goal of this study, to help researchers gain a rich, phenomenological understanding of the male and female history class experience, was largely achieved. The study yielded important findings relating to the participants experiences and perceptions and it revealed the essence of the male and female experience. It has helped us understand how high school students make sense of their history experience.

Yet the inherent limitations of IPA research should be acknowledged. By design it was not “grand in scale” or “ambitious in reach” (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, p. 47, 2009). It did not seek to understand the *causes* of the participant experience; it did not seek to address the consequences the participant experience. In a descriptive, rather than explanatory way, this study was concerned with the particular experience of a particular group of participants in a particular setting. Given these limitations and given that the study was grounded in a particular phenomenon as experienced by a homogeneous group, findings should not be transferred to another setting. A variety of influences, including the distinctive pedagogical orientation of teachers at the research site were exclusive to the experience of participants in this study. IPA allows for “theoretical transferability,” but the experience of participants should not be generalized (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, p. 51, 2009). One of the primary values of IPA research, however, is that it can point scholars in clear directions for future study.
Recommendations for Further Study

This study adds significantly to practitioner and researcher understanding of how the male and female experience is different, but it leaves open important questions. Additional inquiry should focus on further untangling why males and females appear to experience differing levels of engagement and should investigate what effect, if any, these differences have on actual (rather than perceived) performance or achievement. Additional qualitative studies might help us understand the why, while robust quantitative studies could help us understand potential effects.

While the study focused on the student experience, it raises important pedagogical questions that need to be studied further. Scholars and practitioners would benefit from additional studies that examine the role that curriculum design and instructional practices play in producing the experiences explored and described in this study. The educational community needs to understand if history teaching practices are responsible for the uneven experience of the participants and needs to further explore pedagogical approaches that could result in a more equitable experience.

As noted earlier, this study provides enough evidence of gender specific experiences to suggest the need to apply a Critical Theory Framework to enhance our understanding of the causes and effects of the difference in the male and female history experience. We do not know, for example, if gender based stereotypes and prejudices influenced the experience of the participants or their perceptions of their peers. A critical lens could be applied to further understand the dichotomy the participants experienced between true learning and achievement. Educational practitioners and the research community would benefit from additional studies that examine the correlations between gender and performance outcomes.
Conclusion

This study has not fully untangled the differences in the experience of males and females, but it has added significantly to our understanding of how males and females experience and make sense of their experience with high school history. We have a stronger understanding of how participants interpreted their performance and engagement and the study has confirmed the understanding of researchers and practitioners that self-beliefs powerfully influence the experience of learners. For females in this study, feelings of confidence, competence and efficacy, shaped interest and engagement in profound ways and shaped their approach to learning and achievement. In this respect, Social Cognitive Learning Theory proved to be a useful lens through which to view the student experience. The study has also confirmed existing literature which has shown that males and females experience the content of their history class in very different ways. Despite the limitations associated with IPA research, the study illuminates the experience of male and female history students and points the way to future research. Most importantly, the study directs educators toward equitable teaching practices in an academic discipline with great importance to American society.
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Appendix A

Interview Guide

The Experience of Males and Females in High School History: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
**IPA Interviewing:**

IPA methodology requires an approach to interviewing that is unscripted, open-ended and exploratory. In IPA research, the participants’ thoughts, feelings and experiences need to guide a conversation that is initiated by the interview guide. As a result the interview guide below was used as a jumping off point for data collection. The questions were administered flexibly and the interview questions were be modified, reordered or supplemented in light of participants’ responses and in order to learn more about the attitudes, thoughts, feelings beliefs and perceptions of the participants. In short, the interview guide shaped the interviews, but will not pre-determine the course of the conversation.

**Research Questions:**

The interviews associated with this study will explore this primary research question:

- How do male and female students make sense of their experience with a high school history class?

The interviews will also explore the following sub research questions:

- How do male and female students experience the content or historical topics taught in a high school history class?
- How do male and female students experience the variety of pedagogical or instructional approaches found in a high school history class?
- How do male and female students experience the various forms of assessment used in a high school history class?

**Semi-Structured Interview Questions:**

1. Rapport building questions
   a. Interests outside of school
   b. Activities in school
   c. Summer activities
   d. Jobs
   e. Plans for senior year and beyond
2. Engagement:
   a. Describe an experience or experiences when you felt engaged and enthused about class. Describe what you were doing, how you were feeling, what was the teacher doing?
   b. Do you think the boys or girls were more active and engaged in class? Or was it about the same? Why?
   c. How could you tell if the boys were active and engaged? What were they doing? What was happening in class?
   d. How could you tell if the girls were active and engaged? What were they doing? What was happening in class?
   e. Can you describe positive experiences you had in your junior year history class?
   f. Describe some of the lasting positive memories you will have of your junior year history class.
   g. Describe some of the lasting negative memories you will have of your junior year history class.
   h. Have you ever been involved with extracurricular clubs or activities that were related to social studies (such as Mock law, model U.N.)?
   i. Describe a time that you felt very motivated in history class. What were you studying, what were you doing?
   j. Do you think the boys or girls were more interested and excited by history class? What makes you feel that way?

3. Content
   a. In general do you find history interesting? Why do you feel this way? Have you always felt this way?
   b. Describe the historical figures, events, topics or time periods you studied that were exciting to study. Why were these topics engaging and interesting?
   c. Describe the historical figures, events, topics or time periods you studied which bored you? Why were these topics boring or dull?
   d. Do you think history as a subject is more interesting to boys or girls? Why do you feel that way?

4. Instruction:
   a. What type of history teaching or what type of lessons gives you the best chance of success. In other words describe the classroom environment best supports your learning style? (types of learning activities, individual work, group work, lecture, role playing, active, quiet, movement media/technology, class discussion.)
   b. Can you remember and describe any particular lessons or classroom activity that helped you learn? What were you doing? How did it make you feel? What was the teacher doing? What were your classmates doing?
   c. Can you remember and describe any particular lessons or classroom activity that prevented you from learning? What were you doing? How did it make you feel? What was the teacher doing? What were your classmates doing?
5. Assessments:
   a. Thinking back to your junior year U.S. history class, what type of assessments allowed you to be successful? – tests, projects, classwork, homework, class participation, essays,
   b. What caused you to be successful with these assessments? Hardwork, the teacher, natural talent for the subject, organization
   c. Can you describe how you felt when you were achieved good grades in history class?
   d. What types of assessments caused you to struggle? – tests, projects, classwork, homework, class participation, essays,
   e. What caused you to struggle with these assessments? Lack of effort, the teacher, naturally not good at the subject the subject, lack of organizational skills
   f. Can you describe how you responded when you struggle? How did you feel?

6. Efficacy/confidence/self worth
   a. Do you think you are “good” at history? Why do you feel that way?
   b. Thinking back to your junior year history class would you say that your teacher saw you as a good history student? What makes you feel that way?
   c. What type of skills do you feel students needed to be successful in history class?
   d. Did you ever experience any anxiety/stress in this class? What was the situation? Can you describe the situation?
   e. How did it feel when you felt encouraged by your teacher? How did the teacher encourage you? What were you encouraged about?
   f. How did it feel when you felt discouraged by your teacher? How did the teacher discourage you? What were you discouraged about?
   g. In your view or opinion how would one achieve good grades in class? What did one have to do?
   h. Do you think the boys or girls achieved better grades in your history class? What makes you feel that way?
Appendix B

Unsigned Consent Document – Northeastern University
Informed Consent Form to Be A Research Participant
The Experience of Male and Females in High School History Classes

Dear

I am writing to you, not as Superintendent, but rather as a student at Northeastern University! As part of my doctoral program at Northeastern, I am conducting a study about the differences in the ways male and female students experience their high school history classes. I am excited to invite your participation and I think you will find the process fun and interesting, but it is completely voluntary. You should only participate if you understand what is involved.

Purpose of the research study:

As a history teacher many years ago, I believed that my male and female students experienced my classes differently. They responded differently to the topics we studied, my lessons and the tests and quizzes that I used. The research I have done in my doctoral program has confirmed this. Male and female students have very different ideas about their history classes. They also have different levels of achievement. The purpose of this study is to help me and other teachers understand how students experience their high school history classes. I believe that if we understand male and female student feel about their history classes, then we will be able to select topics, design lessons and choose assessments that will help all students learn.

Why am I being asked to participate in this study?

I am inviting you to join this study because you meet the following criteria

- You or your child is an [name of high school redacted] Senior who has completed 3 high school history courses.
- You or your child has been identified by a counselor or former teacher as a student with strong interpersonal skills, who could provide me with in-depth answers about your history experience.
- You or your child completed a college preparatory U.S. History II course
- Your or your child’s academic experience was typical. You experienced success and worked through some challenges.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

If you and your parents agree to your participation, you will be asked to participate in three interviews. All interviews will be conducted in a room where another adult is available, but not involved or within listening range. Each interview will be audio recorded and last between 30 and 90 minutes. You would be one of six [name of high school redacted] students chosen to participate in this study. The interviews will take place in three stages:
1. The first interview, conducted in early November, would provide me with a chance to discuss the purpose of the study and learn about your experience in your junior year history class.

2. The second interview will be conducted in mid to late November. It will be a 45 to 90 minute interview. I will ask you a series of questions about your feelings about the topics taught in your history classes, your experience with the types of lessons in your history classes and your experience with assessments (tests, quizzes, projects, etc.). The interviews will be very open-ended. There won’t be any right answers. Mostly, I will want to understand your thoughts, feelings and experiences as a history student.

3. The third interview would be in late November or early December. It will last between 45 and 60 minutes. It will be more of a meeting where you will have a chance to review what you told me. You can also review the accuracy of my conclusions. You will also be able to raise any other issues that we may have missed our first two meetings.

Time required:

In total, over the course of the three stages I would expect that the interviews will last approximately 2.5 hours. Each interview will be conducted after the school day in the library or classroom of your choice. You can choose the day.

Compensation:

As compensation and to express my appreciation, I will provide student participants with a $15 Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks Gift Card as soon as you complete the interviews. There will be no cost to you for participating.

Risks and Benefits: Is there any worry I should have about participating?

There may be some risk of being uncomfortable with the interview, but the interviews are set up to be comfortable and conversational. You will be asked to openly and honestly discuss your personal experiences with your junior year history class. The interviews have the potential to help you gain a deeper understanding of your learning style and your interests. Also, there is a risk that you may be concerned that I am a school administrator. Please know that I am not acting in my role as a Superintendent and I cannot ask students about specific teachers or classmates. I am approaching this as a Northeastern University student working carefully with my advisors and instructors.

Confidentiality: Who will see the information about me?

Your confidentiality as a participant will be protected. You will be assigned a unique fake name that will be used throughout the study and in the final report. Throughout the interview period only I will have access to the data. Digital records, my research notes and any transcripts not included in the final study will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. You, on the other hand, should feel free to discuss my project with your parents and your teachers. I have no
expectation that you will withhold the contents of the interview from friends, teachers or parents. Also, please know that I won’t ask you the about specific teachers. This is about your experiences. If you do provide specific examples during the interview, the names and situations will be altered to protect your privacy and your teachers’ privacy.

**Voluntary participation and right to withdraw from the study:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions. You can withdraw for any reason at any time without consequence.

If at any time you or your parents have questions about the study, I can be contacted at 413-330-9865 or oshea.mau@husky.neu.edu. You could also contact my Northeastern Faculty Advisor, Dr. Sara Ewell at S.Ewell@neu.edu.

**If you have any questions regarding your rights as a parent or as participation:** You may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call Ms. Regina anonymously if you wish.

I will soon follow up to see if you are interested and answer any questions about the project. Your signature and your parent/guardians signature will be needed in order for you to participate. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Marty O’Shea

Northeastern University

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**Signature and date of parent** providing consent for [child’s name] participation in the study

**Signature and date of student** assenting to participation in the study

**Signature and date of researcher** who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent
Appendix C

Letter to Gatekeepers

The Experience of Males and Females in High School History: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Dear [Guidance Counselor or Teacher]

I am writing to you today, not as Superintendent, but rather as a student at Northeastern University!

My doctoral thesis focuses on the differences in the ways male and female students experience their high school history classes. I believe that if we understand male and female student experience with their history classes, then we will be able to select topics of study, design lessons and choose assessments that support the learning needs and interests of both male and female students.

With you as a faculty member with a close working knowledge of [name of high school redacted] High School students, I am hoping you can help me identify students who meet each of the following criteria:

- Students who are currently [high school name redacted] Seniors and who have completed 3 high school history courses
- Students with strong interpersonal skills, who could engage in a rich conversation and could provide me with in-depth descriptions of their high school history experience.
- Students whose academic experience in history class was typical. They experienced success, yet worked through some challenges.
- Students with average performance levels in history courses and other courses - defined as students who have maintained a history grade point average (GPA) between 2.75 and 3.25 and an overall GPA in the same range.

Student participants will be asked to participate in three, 30-90 minute interviews that I will conduct over the course of approximately three months. There will be an adult witness with me at all times during the interviews. They will be asked a series of questions designed to help me understand their feelings about the topics taught in their history classes, their experience with the types of lessons and teaching done in their history classes and their experience with various types of assessments. The interviews will be very open-ended. As compensation for participating and to express my appreciation, I will provide all student participants with a $15.00 Dunkin Donuts Gift Card as soon as they complete the interviews.

Please be assured that the study conforms to established research protocols that protect human research participants. On September xxx, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Northeastern University center for Human Research Protection approved the study’s goals, recruitment procedures, consent process, methodology, and confidentiality protections. The ethical conduct of the research is being overseen by the study’s Principal Investigator/ Faculty Advisor, Dr. Sara Ewell. For your review, I have attached a Northeastern University form
documenting Dr. Ewell’s assurances that the study conforms to the institution’s IRB standards. Dr. Ewell can be contacted at S.Ewell@neu.edu.

For rights as participants, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu.

Additionally, you should be aware that on August xx, 2015, the [district name redacted] School Committee voted to grant its permission to me conduct research involving students at [name of high school redacted] High School under the terms and conditions set forth by Northeastern University. The Committee’s signed permission form is attached for your review. Should you have questions regarding the Committee’s expectations, you may contact Chairman Peter Salerno at 413-596-3884.

I am hoping that you will be willing to nominate students to participate in this study. Your confidentiality in the recruitment process will be strictly maintained and the students’ confidentiality will be closely guarded throughout the study. Each will be assigned a unique pseudonym that will be used throughout the study and in the final report. Throughout the interview period only I, as the researcher, will have access to collected data. Students will be free to discuss the interviews and the study with you, their parents and other teachers. Participation will be completely voluntary. Consent will be obtained from students and their parents. Students will have the right to refuse to answer any questions and can withdraw for any reason from the study at any time without consequence.

The benefits to the students who are recruited to participate outweigh the minimal risks associated with discussing their personal experiences with their junior year history class. I hope that the interview process will help student participants gain a deeper understanding of their learning styles and interests and that they will come to understand what “works” for them as a learner.

If you are interested in assisting with the recruitment process for this important study, please forward me the names of any number of students matching the criteria listed above. You may list them in space provided and return it to me via interoffice mail or email names to oshea.mau@husky.neu.edu.

The following Seniors match the identified criteria and are recommended for recruitment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Contact Information</th>
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Thank you in advance for your support and participation!

Sincerely,
Marty O’Shea