Understanding and Teaching the Past to Students in a College Prep World History Class: A Qualitative Action Research Design

A thesis presented by Andrea R. Plasko to The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education In the field of Education

College of Professional Studies Northeastern University Boston, Massachusetts December 2016
Abstract

This doctoral study reflected the need for research in the field of history education specific to how students with various learning abilities understand the past when they use historical evidence. By using developmental theory as a lens to understand this process, this qualitative action research study answered the following question: How do ninth grade students who have been placed in a College Prep World History class explain how they understand the past through the use of historical evidence? This study took place in one, ninth grade College Prep World History classroom at a suburban high school located west of Boston and involved nine student participants, eight girls and one boy. These participants were enrolled in the ninth grade College Prep World History course, a course specifically designed for students who need more content and skill support than they would receive in other ninth grade World History classes. Since the action research nature of this study allowed for both researcher and student reflection and collaboration, the data was collected in a comfortable and familiar environment. The data collected was provided through student interviews, assessments, and classroom observations following student participation in activities that required the use of historical evidence. While much of the data collected confirmed and complemented the current literature on developmental theory, student understanding of the past, and the use of student voice, data analysis also complicated some of the existing ideas in the literature and offered new insights, specific to how students, who need more content and skill support, understand the past when they use historical evidence. Therefore, the findings revealed how various instructional strategies, activity formats and requirements, student interaction with varied and multiple sources, and student historical thinking skills both positively and negatively impacted student
understanding of the past. Participants’ explanations provided insights into how these activities hindered or helped their ability to make meaning of the past.

Keywords: cognitive development, historical understanding, historical evidence, student voice, content support, skill support
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the many students I have taught in my College Prep classes. I am extremely grateful for everything you have taught me about teaching and learning. May you always feel empowered to lend your invaluable voices to issues that matter to you.
Acknowledgements

There are many people to thank for their support and encouragement during this journey. This research study would not have been possible without the student participants from my College Prep World History class. Their reflection and candor validated the importance of using student voice as a means to understand students’ classroom experiences and evaluate teaching practices. They, along with the many students I have taught in the College Prep course, inspired this study. I am also grateful to the parents/guardians of the student participants for allowing their child to participate in this study and for their enthusiasm.

I also want to thank Dr. Alan Stoskopf and Dr. Jane Lohmann, whom I was fortunate to have as both professors and advisors. Alan began this journey with me, and his metaphor of “peeling away the onion” to describe the research process always helped to keep it in perspective. Even as he was appointed visiting scholar at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education, Alan continued on as my advisor until he went abroad to conduct research. Jane Lohmann finished this journey with me and her insights and perspectives provided a different lens through which to view my research and the research participants. It was in Jane’s course on curriculum leadership that I was first introduced to the literature on student voice, which in many ways became the backbone of this thesis. I would like to thank both Alan and Jane for their endless support and encouragement.

In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Lydia Young, Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed, and Dr. Chris Unger, for their time as my second and third readers. Their insights helped to bring this thesis full circle.

I am also grateful for the support and enthusiasm of the high school administration and my colleagues in the Special Education and Social Studies Departments from where this study
took place. I would like to thank in particular, Julie Doyle, who was a part of the peer debriefing process and who, as a Special Educator, offered unique insights regarding student feedback.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my friends and family for their support and encouragement, in what turned out to be a longer journey than any of us anticipated. I would especially like to thank my Mom, Dad, and brother, Mike for always cheering me on, no matter the endeavors I have chosen to pursue. And finally, I am incredibly grateful to my husband Steve for his patience, love, and encouragement, and whose own work in education inspires me everyday.
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. 2
DEDICATION ................................................................................................................................................ 4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................................................................................. 5
LIST OF TABLES .......................................................................................................................................... 11
LIST OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................................................... 12
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................... 13
  Significance of Problem................................................................................................................................. 13
  Research Question ......................................................................................................................................... 15
  A Note on Ableism ......................................................................................................................................... 16
  Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................................................. 17
    Lev Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians ........................................................................................................... 18
    Jerome Bruner in light of Lev Vygotsky’s work ......................................................................................... 22
    Jean Piaget and neo-Piagetians in light of Lev Vygotsky’s work ................................................................. 23
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................... 25

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................................................................... 26
  Cognitive Development and Student Understanding of the Past ................................................................. 27
  Current Research Regarding how Students with Different Abilities Understand the Past .......................... 30
  The Effect of Instructional Strategies on the Learning of the Past ............................................................. 34
  Incorporating Student Voice in the Learning Process in History Education ......................................... 40
    Rationale for student voice ......................................................................................................................... 40
    Student perspective .................................................................................................................................... 42
    Teacher perspective .................................................................................................................................... 46
    Classroom practices ................................................................................................................................. 47
  The Arguments For and Against Tracking ................................................................................................. 50
    Arguments for tracking ............................................................................................................................... 52
      Stakeholders ............................................................................................................................................ 52
        Educator perspectives ............................................................................................................................. 52
        Parent perspectives ............................................................................................................................... 54
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 129
Significance of Research to the Theoretical Framework ........................................... 130
  Lev Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians ........................................................................ 131
  Jerome Bruner in light of Vygotsky’s work .............................................................. 133
  Piaget and neo-Piagetians in light of Vygotsky’s work ............................................ 135
Significance of Research to the Literature Review .................................................... 137
  Cognitive development and student understanding of the past ............................. 138
  Current research regarding how students with different abilities
  understand the past .................................................................................................. 140
  The effect of instructional strategies on the learning of the past ............................ 142
  Incorporating student voice in the learning process in history education .............. 146
    Rationale for student voice ....................................................................................... 146
    Student perspective .................................................................................................. 148
Teacher perspective ..............................................................150
Classroom practices ............................................................151
Implications for Educational Practice and Future Research ........................................153
  Implications for educational practice .............................................156
  Implications for History education ................................................156
  Implications for educators in History education ..................................157
  Implications for Special Educators ...............................................160
  Implications for students and parents/guardians ..................................161
  Implications for future research ..................................................162

CONCLUSION ...........................................................................165
REFERENCES ............................................................................167
APPENDIX A: Rubrics: Use of Historical Sources to Formulate Explanations ..............178
APPENDIX B: Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval letter, letter home to parents, and Informed Student and Parent Consent Form ........................................180
APPENDIX C: Activity 3: Buy My Dynasty .........................................................186
APPENDIX D: Activity 6: Charlemagne Primary Source Organizer and Body Paragraph .........................................................189
List of Tables

Table 1. Data Collection Process ..............................................................................................................73
Table 2. Rubric: Evidence – Critical Interrogation of a Source .................................................................75
Table 3. Analyzing Qualitative Data .............................................................................................................78
Table 4. Data Collection and Analysis Timeline ..........................................................................................80
Table 5. Units 6 and 7 Activity Descriptions and Derived Data Points .......................................................90
List of Figures

Figure 1. Student Feedback on the Helpfulness of Instruction for Activity 3:

    Buy My Dynasty.................................................................................................................................................. 100

Figure 2. Teacher Memos on Student interaction with a Primary Source Organizer during Activity 6: Charlemagne Primary Source Organizer and Body Paragraph ........... 102

Figure 3. Student Feedback Regarding Group Work During Activity 3: Buy My Dynasty....... 109

Figure 4. Student Feedback Regarding their Understanding of Maps During Activity 4:

    Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps..................................................................................................... 119

Figure 5. Researcher Memos Regarding Student Experiences with Empathy for Activity 2:

    China’s Dilemma............................................................................................................................................... 126
Chapter 1: Introduction

Since a Nation at Risk and No Child Left Behind, educational reform movements have set lofty goals to provide students regardless of race, class, and gender with an equitable education. Historically, to ensure our competitive edge globally, the focus of reform has taken place within the content areas of reading and math, paying less attention to the study of history education (De La Paz & MacArthur, 2003). As a result, only recently has there been scholarly research in the domain of history education that teachers can reference to guide them in their assessment of their own practices and instructional strategies.

In addition to meeting the demands imposed by such legislative efforts, teachers are also presented with the challenge of providing equal learning opportunities to students with different cognitive abilities. While there is an abundance of literature explaining the cognitive development of children with different abilities, limited research has been conducted to specifically address the challenges for students who need more content and skill support in the content area of history (Morocco, 2001).

Significance of Problem

The relevance of history education in schools is no stranger to debate and can explain why little research has been conducted on how students understand the past. Arguments against the study of history suggest it is more important to learn about the world today rather than dedicate time to a field that holds no concrete answers (McNeill, 1985). The study of the past, however, provides students with the foundational knowledge for making future political, social, and economic decisions regarding institutions that in many cases, were founded centuries ago (McNeill, 1985). Likewise, history helps explain current trends through the examination of factors that led to them (Stearns, 1998).
These benefits are coupled with the advantages of developing higher-order thinking skills, skills students develop as they study the past (Stearns, 1998). Such skills are deemed necessary for students to compete in a highly competitive world both at the collegiate and professional level (Bulgren, Deshler, & Lenz, 2007). As a ninth grade World History teacher for six years, I taught students with various cognitive abilities. Due to this experience, I was curious about how students placed in the College Prep World History courses accessed the curriculum. This course was one of three levels offered at the high school and was designed to focus on content and skills support, specific but not limited to the areas of reading, writing, and higher-order thinking. Nonetheless, I have found limited research on how students who need such support come to understand the past. The current lack of research in this area hinders a teacher’s acquisition of effective instructional practices that not only helps students as they learn about the past but also as they develop higher-order thinking skills.

In addition, and as will be further discussed in Chapter 5, the current literature did not access the invaluable feedback that students who need content and skill support can offer about teaching and learning. As a result, the literature did little to debunk the perceptions that some peers, some teachers, and some members of the community at large have about classes like the College Prep course and the students that take them. Therefore, one of my goals in conducting this research was to give students in my College Prep course a voice, and the opportunity to shed light on their learning experiences as they interacted with rich historical content and critical thinking.

As a result, it is from the educational benefits of studying the past and the lack of research in the field of history education, specific to students in the College Prep course who need more content and skill support that my problem of practice emerged.
The questions posed for the literature review that addressed this problem of practice were the following:

- How does cognitive development affect student understanding of the past?
- What do we know about how students with different cognitive abilities understand the past?
- How do instructional strategies affect the learning of the past for students with different cognitive abilities in high school history education?
- What does the following literature tell us about incorporating student voice in the learning process in history education?

**Research Question**

The questions posed for the literature review were driven by developmental theory discussed in the theoretical framework section and were framed by an initial review of the literature. With the formal literature review completed, I derived the following research question, which has shaped my research design:

*How do ninth grade students placed in a College Prep World History class explain how they understand the past through the use of historical evidence?*

This research question addressed both my intellectual and practical goals (Maxwell, 2005). In terms of intellectual goals, through data collection I had the opportunity to understand how students in my College Prep classes, who needed more content and skill support, experienced using historical evidence to understand the past. My practical goals were also addressed through the analysis of student responses to various activities that students participate in. This data not only benefited my own work but the work of my colleagues as well. Although this research design addressed students in my College Prep classes specifically, I believe that this data will also provide insights into how all of my history students understand the past, regardless
of the level of history course they take. In addition, my research addressed a 2008 New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) evaluative report which recommended a review of the extent to which higher-order thinking and problem solving skills were taught to students in College Prep level courses. Research that referenced how students understand the past and identified strategies that can help them do so helped address my goals and NEASC’s recommendations.

The following doctoral thesis reflected my problem of practice, theoretical framework, and literature review that informed my research question and research design. Connecting to my problem of practice, my theoretical framework discussed the relevance of developmental theory, highlighting Lev Vygotsky with Piagetian and Brunerian ideas. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review on student understanding and student voice, which addressed my problem of practice and the four research questions that were posed to the literature. The research design is discussed in Chapter 3 and describes the rationale for my research question, the methodology of my research design, and my plan for data collection and analysis. The research design section ends with a discussion of the validity and credibility of the research design. Chapters 4 and 5 present and discuss my research findings respectively, with Chapter 5 ending with the implications of the findings for educational practice and future research.

A Note on Ableism

Finally, it is important to note, that while most of the literature within my theoretical framework, along with the literature review discussing the study of the past, did not distinguish between students with different abilities, some of it did specifically highlight cognitive development and the study of the past for students with learning disabilities. Therefore, throughout this research study, I used the terms “learning disabled”, “learning disabilities”, and
other related terms, when it was used by researchers or discussed within the context of their research. My position on this was influenced by the literature regarding the implications of the label “learning disability” and its negative influence on teacher, parents, and student expectations (Biklen, 1992; Shifrer, 2013). This impact, along with the rise of ableism, “a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional, and physical disabilities” (Rauscher & McClintock, p. 198, 1996), has stemmed from negative stereotypes about what those with disabilities are capable of achieving (Storey, 2007). These sentiments, specific to education, have contributed to a focus on student disabilities rather than abilities (Storey, 2007), along with the perception that students that have been given these labels are “lazy or stupid” (Shifrer, p. 463, 2013). While it is important to acknowledge that people with disabilities have “redefined the term disabled, claiming it as a positive descriptor of a powerful and proud group of people with strengths and abilities” (Griffin, et al., p. 336, 2007), out of respect for my students who had been identified as having a learning disability, many of whom participated in this study, I was not comfortable using labels commonly associated with negative stereotypes. I felt however, that it was important to include the discussions regarding the study of the past for students with learning disabilities both within the theoretical framework and the literature review, because it offered helpful teaching strategies that can benefit all students.

**Theoretical Framework**

Developmental theory comprised my theoretical framework and informed my problem of practice and research questions regarding how students in my ninth grade College Prep World History classes understand the past when they use historical evidence. This theory addressed how students cognitively develop and provided insights that have furthered my understanding of my problem of practice. In addition, developmental theory provided a context for the
examination of how students in my College Prep World History classes understand the past and what the best teaching practices are for knowledge acquisition and skill development.

**Lev Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians.** Within developmental theory there are various perspectives that explain how students learn. The works of Lev Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians provided the overall understanding of my problem of practice with aspects of Piagetian and Brunerian ideas included within a Vygotskian theoretical lens. Vygotsky’s consideration for the influence of culture on cognitive development is relevant to students’ understanding of the past (Miller, 2002). He believed that cultural influences impact not only what skills and knowledge students acquire but also how they acquire them (Miller, 2002). To that end, the extent to which they can participate in the culture in which they live are reflective of their cognitive development. More specifically, Vygotsky’s work emphasized that this cognitive development is dependent on their various social experiences both within and outside of the classroom (Karpov & Bransford, 1995). The works of neo-Vygotskians specifically address how culture influences prior knowledge. For example, current literature emphasized that prior knowledge can serve as a barrier to student learning (Haenen, Schrijnemakers, & Stufkens, 2003). Both the works of Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians regarding cultural influence were relevant to my research interests into how students understand the past. Although the high school research site is predominately white, I often had a diverse population of students in my College Prep classes. This theory, therefore, informed my thinking about how their cultural influences impacted their cognitive development and more specifically how it could affect their understanding of the past. More specifically, it helped shed light on how ideas, cultural beliefs, misconceptions, and biases (Miller, 2002) potentially held by all students, may interfere with their practice of historical concepts such as empathy and causation.
Vygotsky’s identification of learning tools as a means for which students can acquire knowledge in their cultural environment informed the research as to the impact of instructional strategies on student understanding of the past. Vygotsky identified language, mnemonic devices, concepts, and symbols as effective tools for helping students acquire knowledge when presented by a more knowledgeable peer or adult (Karpov & Bransford, 1995). For example, he deemed the teacher as the more knowledgeable other who influences the zone of proximal development; the distance between what students know and what they have the potential of knowing (Gauvain & Cole, 1997; Powell & Kalina, 2009). In considering the impact of dialogue between teachers and students and students and their peers, such interactions allow students to examine subjects from a variety of perspectives which contribute to their own ability to make meaning of the specific topic of study (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2008; Trudge, 1990). More specifically, in working with a more knowledgeable peer such collaboration is mutually beneficial in that through discussion, debate, and sharing, previous perceptions and misconceptions are challenged and clarified (Applefield, Huber, & Moallem, 2000).

Contributing to this line of thinking, “Vygotsky noted that successful problem solvers talk themselves through difficult problems. In cooperative groups, children can hear this inner speech out loud and can learn how successful problem solvers are thinking through their approaches” (Yilmaz, p.167, 2008). Therefore, Vygotsky’s attention to the role that educators and peers play in a student’s cognitive development sheds light on possible research areas regarding how effective instructional strategies could facilitate such interaction and desired learning outcomes for content and skill acquisition.

While students can benefit from interacting with a more knowledgeable other, it is important to consider the means through which students can become independent learners.
Vygotsky stressed the need to provide students with definitions as a part of this process; neo-Vygotskians extended his ideas regarding the acquisition of cognitive tools by stressing the need for students to learn how to apply these concepts in various situations. Relevant to the study of the past, a student knowing the definition of historical empathy is quite different from applying such a tool to various historical circumstances. Such internalization, according to Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians, takes place when the child can perform such tasks without help from a peer or adult. My personal experiences teaching students in my College Prep World History classes have shown that they often struggle with the internalization of historical terms and previously taught reading and writing skills. This struggle hinders their ability to take on the role of a historian, which is crucial for the understanding of the past. In addition to the psychological tools previously listed, Vygotsky suggested strategies such as prompts, modeling, explanations, discussions, encouragement, and collaboration to influence student development rather than rote memorization which may hinder their acquisition of knowledge (Gauvain & Cole, 1997).

Vygotsky’s ideas regarding internalization show the complexity of teaching students the various historical skills they need when studying the past. As a researcher, this particular lens provided the means through which I could find specific tools that support students’ internalization process. Reinforcing this approach, Vygotsky’s ideas on observing growth in student learning rather than focusing on grades, particularly informed the research into the internalization process of students in College Prep history classes, because many of them struggled with skill based assignments such as writing and reading from various sources.

Citing Vygotsky’s influence on social constructivism, Trent, Artilles, and Englert (1998), specifically applied this theory to the teaching of students with learning disabilities. As an alternative to teaching students with learning disabilities through rote memorization of content
and skills, a process that requires students to independently make meaning of information, Trent, et al. (1998) suggested embedding skills and content through the use of problem-solving activities in collaboration with a more knowledgeable peer. Such interaction also allowed students with learning disabilities to engage in content and skill based discourse, helping them to recognize strategies for problem solving that they may not easily identify (McNamara & Wong, 2003). To this end, as with Vygotsky, they encouraged providing tasks that exceed the students’ current cognitive level, so they can solve problems through trial and error (McNamara & Wong, 2003). More specifically, Trent, et al. (1998) used the example of reciprocal teaching as a means for which peers and teachers can help students who have reading difficulties. Through questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting both teachers and students lead the discussion about a particular text (Trent, et al., 1998). According to Trent, et al. (1998), studies showed that the practice of reciprocal teaching improved students’ ability to summarize, create questions, clarify, and predict. Additionally, they have shown that students have been able to apply these skills to other content areas. To this end, garnering feedback from students in my College Prep World History classes about the impact of reciprocal teaching would help to inform my own teaching practices. Moreover, connecting back to the internalization process that Vygotsky discussed, research in this area would be particularly useful for my College Prep classes in which there are students not only with various reading, writing, and historical thinking abilities but who are inconsistent in implementing the skills needed for studying the past. In both cases, asking for student input would help to develop teaching tools to aid students in this process.

In addition, Vygotsky’s ideas about the need for students to internalize skills and become independent learners informed my thinking in that the challenges students in my College Prep
classes face in studying the past are multifaceted. They are not only trying to negotiate their own prior knowledge in the context of what they are learning. They are also trying to acquire new skills specific to the study of the past. Moreover, they are also trying to simultaneously marry the content they are learning with additional skill support I am providing. This thinking had great implications for my research and how students in my College Prep classes understand the past. As result, my research involved finding out how the study of the past presented direct challenges to their personal learning styles and the internalization of the skills and content they were taught.

**Jerome Bruner in light of Lev Vygotsky’s work.** In light of Lev Vygotsky’s work, developmental theorist Jerome Bruner is also relevant to my research interests in fostering student proficiency in historical understanding, higher-order thinking skills, and reading comprehension. Supporting Vygotsky’s thinking about the influence of a child’s cultural environment, Bruner (1977) discussed the learning of content as three concurrent processes during which students build upon knowledge they already have, evaluate new information and how it fits into their world, and check their understanding of this information to ensure accuracy. He acknowledged that as children reach various stages of development, their views of the world change and so does their rationalization of such views. Bruner (1986) also emphasized that when children are confused by the world around them, they will often draw conclusions based on those who are influential in their lives. Resonating with Vygotsky’s conclusions regarding cultural influences on student learning, Bruner’s work sheds light on the complexity of teaching students about the past while they have many influences around them.

Extending Vygotsky’s ideas about children learning more difficult concepts from their more knowledgeable peer and teacher, Bruner (1977, 1996) believed that a student at any age
can be taught more sophisticated concepts as long as they are explained in a language that is developmentally appropriate. He also believed that the approach to teaching different subject matter in this way would have two benefits. The first is that the child will want to learn more difficult topics and perform more difficult tasks drawing them into the next stage of development (Bruner, 1977). The second is that, if students are exposed to more difficult concepts early on it can make learning easier and can serve as a foundation for even more complicated tasks (Bruner, 1977). Citing his own experiences in early education, Bruner (1977) argued that this type of learning is successful when teachers give their students an opportunity to grapple with information, discuss it, negotiate their own thinking in terms of others and consider the multiple perspectives that one may take towards the topic of study. As a teacher of College Prep classes, I observed that students struggle to grasp abstract ideas and acquire critical thinking tools. While at times I gave students similar materials that students enrolled in my Advanced College Prep and Honors classes received, experience showed that even with pacing and scaffolding, students in the College Prep class still often struggled to make meaning of this material. These observations shed light on the fact that even with a more knowledgeable other, student acquisition of skills and content varied based on the instruction that is provided during the learning process. These observations implied a need to find more effective methods for teaching more complicated tasks to students in the College Prep classes. Not only was this pertinent to the learning of the past, but it is also relevant to the history department’s goal of preparing students to move up a level during their high school career.

**Jean Piaget and neo-Piagetians in light of Lev Vygotsky’s work.** Aspects of Lev Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development also resonated with the work of Jean Piaget and neo-Piagetians. Jean Piaget also explored how and why children developed at certain stages of
their life. Relevant to a child’s cultural development mentioned previously by Vygotsky and Bruner, Piaget’s cognitive adaptation theory also recognized that, children’s views of the world become more complex over time (Miller, 2002). Cognitive adaptation, which involves both assimilation and accommodation, explains how information fits into a student’s current knowledge or is modified to fit into a child’s current thinking (Miller, 2002). In terms of accommodation, Piaget emphasized that if a new piece of information is radically different from a person’s prior perceptions then they will be unable to accept it as true (Miller, 2002). Any contradictory evidence that may challenge their own thinking leads to disequilibrium where students may resort to the following: 1) they ignore new information for their own prior schema; 2) they examine both the contradiction and their original schema as separate entities; or 3) they alter their initial thinking to explain the contradiction (Yilmaz, 2008). Furthermore, in challenging student preconceptions, “Students learn that their constructed beliefs do not necessarily qualify as knowledge and that knowledge emerges from sources other than their own individual cognition” (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, p. 79, 2008). Therefore, as Piaget suggested, smaller steps should be taken during the learning process to help students negotiate this new information (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2008). As with Vygotsky’s theory about the impact of cultural influences on student learning, Piaget’s thinking sheds light on how students evaluate their own knowledge and cannot distinguish between what is from their own experiences and those constructed by others. Similar to Piaget, neo-Piagetians emphasized the importance of individualized instruction based on an individual students’ cognitive development (Morra, Gobbo, Marini, & Sheese, 2008). In doing so, a teacher should be aware of the strategies students possess and employ when faced with a task (Case, 1993; Morra, et al., 2008). The works of Piaget and neo-Piagetians, in light of Vygotsky’s ideas about cultural development,
challenged my thinking about how students assess the past in light of their own knowledge. As a researcher, discovering ways to involve students in the examination of their own thinking may prove fruitful in helping them to acquire higher-order thinking skills and to examine the past through a more critical lens.

**Conclusion**

While the works of Jerome Bruner and Jean Piaget were relevant to my research interests and questions, Lev Vygotsky’s developmental theory encompassed the elements of their theories that were the most relevant to my problem of practice. Vygotsky’s ideas about the more knowledgeable other, the cultural environment and learning, and the process of internalization, extended my thinking about student cognitive development and their understanding of the past. His ideas also had implications for my research interests.

Developmental theory helped to understand how students with various cognitive abilities learn and it provided a foundation for the assessment of my practices in the teaching of both skill-based strategies and the World History curriculum. In addition, primarily the work of Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians, complemented by Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, and neo-Piagetians, set the foundation for further exploration of new teaching strategies that could improve my students’ understanding of the past and their skill development. The *Literature Review* that follows in Chapter 2 continues to build upon this foundation. It specifically discusses the existing literature as it pertains to the four questions regarding my problem of practice and the study of the past.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following four bodies of literature informed my problem of practice and questions regarding how ninth grade students in my College Prep World History classes understand the past. Relevant to this literature review is the term historical understanding which refers to the degree to which students are able to employ the following historical concepts to make meaning of the past: time and sequence, continuity and change, empathy, causation, and historical evidence (Lee, 2005; Seixas, 1996). Student acquisition of these core concepts referenced in the following sections is necessary for student understanding of the past for the following reasons:

- **Time and sequence** helps students understand that “processes in history” (Lee, p.41, 2005) took place over a long period of time rather than in isolated moments;
- **Continuity and change** helps students understand the context in which change took place by exploring connections among people, places, and events. This concept also helps with determining which events are historically significant and which are of least importance in order to prioritize events studied (Seixas, 1994);
- **Empathy** is needed to understand the ideas, values, and beliefs of various peoples before students can pass judgment on decisions and actions that were made in the past (Foster, 1999; Lee, 2005);
- **Causation** challenges students to consider the cause of certain events beyond linear connections, forcing them to consider multiple factors that contributed to certain outcomes (Lee, 2005); and finally, **historical evidence** helps challenge student conceptions about the past and negotiate between various sources with different levels of credibility (Lee, 2005).

As a part of the discussion on historical understanding and its core concepts, four bodies of literature reflected the current trends in the field regarding history education as it pertained to my research. While it is beyond the scope of this research study, a fifth body of literature reflecting the debate around the practice of tracking, has also been added to this literature review.
to acknowledge that a debate exists about our high school’s current practice of leveling students as they enter the ninth grade, and more specifically my ninth grade College Prep World History classes. Therefore, the following literature review is organized by and addresses the following four questions regarding my problem of practice, and is followed by the literature regarding the debate on tracking.

• How does cognitive development affect student understanding of the past?
• What do we know about how students with different cognitive abilities understand the past?
• How do instructional strategies affect the learning of the past for students with different cognitive abilities in high school history education?
• What does the following literature tell us about incorporating student voice in the learning process in history education?

Cognitive Development and Student Understanding of the Past

The first body of literature regards cognitive development and its effect on how students understand the past. To teach the past, teachers need to understand student thinking about events, people, and other key elements in order to address previous perceptions and biases students have (Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000). Although literature concerning how students understand the past largely references second-order concepts such as contextualization, change, empathy, historical significance, and causation (Donovan & Bransford, 2005; Stearns, et al., 2000), very little research reflects how cognitive development affects these views. Therefore, the theories of Lev Vygotsky, supported by elements from the work of Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner, along with more recent contributions to their work, provide a foundation for addressing this research question.
Mastropieri, Scruggs, Spencer, and Fontana (2003) provide an underlying basis for teachers to think about secondary students’ cognitive development in their content area classes. In their research they expressed concerns about teacher-held expectations regarding student skill levels in the following areas: independence in reading for comprehension from their text and other sources, taking thorough notes from lectures and readings, and distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information. Teacher assumptions about student skill levels in these areas may not only prove to be inaccurate but if instruction takes place with these assumptions, students may struggle to meet teacher expectations and course demands. In addressing students with learning disabilities specifically, Mastropieri et al. (2003) also warned that they might be particularly “overwhelmed with the demands of such learning environments” (p. 52). The concerns expressed by these researchers were relevant to my research interests in that I had observed that many of my ninth grade students in the College Prep classes did not possess the skills to meet course expectations. Therefore, assessing student skills at the start of the school year through conversation and formative assessments may be a beneficial way to not only gauge where students are in terms of skill proficiency, but to address them in the classroom and assess their progress throughout the school year.

Stuart Greene (1994) expanded on the challenges of integrating this skill work. Greene’s research explored two questions, one of which asked, “What are the cognitive demands of writing and learning in history?” (p.89). Referencing think-aloud protocols from a study he reviewed and using constructivist theory to think about his questions, Greene concluded that students’ prior knowledge and interpretation of tasks affects the ways in which they write and think about the past. For example, as students read texts, they are interpreting, drawing conclusions, and selecting information based on their cognitive ability and prior knowledge.
This prior knowledge, coming from either previous history courses or environments outside of school can greatly influence the interpretation and understanding of the past that Greene is referencing (Haenen, et al., 2003; Karpov & Bransford, 1995; Miller, 2002; Yilmaz, 2008).

Wineburg and Fournier (1994) complemented this thinking through the idea of presentism, where we impose our own views on the past, which they considered to be “something of a psychological default state that must be overcome before one achieves true historical understanding” (p. 286). In addition, such biases can interfere with how students not only interpret the past but their degrees of willingness to question evidence to which they are privy. As Wineburg (2007) affirmed, “Countless studies attest that everyday thinking elects the path of least resistance, often choosing what is most available over what is most trustworthy” (p. 7). This may prevent students from thinking contextually, which is necessary for considering the origins of historical documents, decisions made in the past, and in identifying gaps in student knowledge (Reisman & Wineburg, 2008).

The emphasis on the influence of student prior knowledge in these studies is congruent with the theories of Vygotsky, Bruner, and Piaget. In addition to recognizing student abilities prior to instruction, Vygotsky, Bruner, and Piaget also reinforced these studies’ conclusions about the importance of recognizing and working with students’ prior knowledge and understanding where that knowledge came from. As a researcher, these connections prepared me to think about instructional strategies that could best address student skill and knowledge acquisition throughout the school year. Seeking feedback from students would not only inform instructional practices but make students aware of their own thinking processes when engaged in second-order historical thinking skills. As Bruner (1986) suggested, the learning of content involves the process by which students build upon their prior knowledge, evaluate new
information in terms of their own world, and check their thinking for accuracy. Having students keep track of this process through the use of journals, an instructional strategy that will be discussed later in this literature review, would help to this end, and also help to track Vygotsky’s internalization process, where students are able to independently think critically about the study of the past.

**Current Research Regarding how Students with Different Abilities Understand the Past**

The literature regarding how students with different abilities understand the past was on how students understand and identify with history. More specifically, the research addressed how students empathize, rate historical significance, and view time (Carretero, Jacott, Limon, Lopez-Manjon, & Leon, 1994; Seixas, 1993; Yeager, Foster & Greer, 2002). As a result, this literature, in many respects, directly relates to student cognitive development discussed in the previous section.

In addressing historical understanding, Seixas (1993) conducted a study in which he interviewed Canadian secondary students from two different classes about how they altered their current knowledge of history, the sources they relied on in doing so, and how they determined whether a source is reliable. Significant to these research interests for Seixas was the tool of historical agency, in which the ideas of agency, empathy, and moral judgment interconnect. Seixas believed that without this tool, “students cannot see themselves as operating in the same realm as their historical figures whom they are studying, and thus cannot make meaning of history” (p. 303). With two exceptions, his findings concluded that, in identifying historical significance, students were more influenced by their family history, television, and popular culture rather than the history they studied in class. His findings also showed that students relied on family experiences “In the processes of establishing historical fact, assessing historical
interpretation, and hypothesizing about historical patterns” (p. 320). In addition, students articulated that media and secondary sources contained bias but were unable to express how to critically approach the reading of primary sources and therefore were more likely to accept eyewitness reports. Given external influences on student interpretation of the past and historical sources, Seixas’ stressed the importance of considering the degrees to which curriculum allows for the integration of these stories.

Similar to Seixas’ (1993) research, Yeager, et al.’s (2002) study of 44 eighth graders from two classes, one in the United States and one from England, investigated how students determined the significance of historical events. Students were interviewed prior to the study to assess their prior historical knowledge and their current topic of study. Researchers then gave students a list of significant 20th century events to rank. Yeager et al. asked students to explain why they were the most important. The students interviewed by Yeager et al. mentioned family, the Internet, and television as resources for their historical knowledge, similar to Seixas’ (1993) findings. As a result, the events that they considered to be historically significant were often connected to these sources. Yeager et al. (2002) believed this to be particularly true for minorities who may perceive events as significant based on their own culture rather than the dominant culture.

In addition to these findings, Yeager et al. (2002) found students often rated historical significance in terms of both positive and negative human behavior and generalized historical events. In terms of the latter, this raised a level of concern about students having the necessary background knowledge and tools to analyze, explain significance, and examine more complex historical sources. Finally, their research demonstrated that both groups lacked knowledge about international events suggesting students are more familiar with national histories or that they
deem national events to be more important. This is relevant in that they also found that students were less clear about how 20th century events connected to events in the past.

The findings of Seixas (1993) and Yeager, et al. (2002) were relevant to my research in that they shed light on how students qualified the historical events that they study. Their findings also suggest that the teaching of instructional tools to understand events within a national and international context would benefit students and their understanding of the past. Because their research was not specific to students with content and skill support needs, additional research to learn if the assessment of the past by students in the College Prep World History classes coincides with the research findings of Seixas (1993) and Yeager, et al. (2002) would be beneficial.

Relevant to the findings of the previous two studies is the study of Carretero, et al. (1994). Citing specific events, the researchers asked students from the sixth, eighth, and tenth grades, along with history teachers to rank the causes for historical change using the following categories: personal, political, economic, ideological, or global. Carretero et al.’s (1994) study concluded that the students rationalized historical change based on personal desires whereas the adults focused on the impersonal. Bain (2010), in citing this example concluded that students seem to “hold the Great Man/Woman view of history, while these World History teachers seemed to want the students to situate human agency within impersonal political or economic structures” (p. 33). This is pertinent to understanding students’ preconceived notions of how to understand history. As a result, Carretero et al.’s (1994) findings were pertinent to my research interest in that using student voice as a means to gain feedback regarding preconceived ideas about the past could help to unpack these notions and allow the teacher to establish criteria for doing so.
The issue of how students’ perceived time and connected recent events to the past was also relevant to the work of Carretero, et al. (1994). In a study about causal explanations, they found that sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students had difficulty estimating time between two periods of study. As an example, “they estimated the durations of prehistorical periods as much briefer than they really were” (p. 363). The study also found that students struggled to understand concepts such as “before Christ” and “after Christ” in order to determine when events took place relative to the present.

Finally, while much of the literature did not distinguish between students with and without learning disabilities (Morocco, 2001), De La Paz and MacArthur (2003) suggested that textbooks, lectures, and primary sources interfere with students with learning disabilities understanding of the past. For example, textbooks cover too much information, which can be difficult for students with reading disabilities to understand (De La Paz & MacArthur, 2003). Likewise, students may have difficulties distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information regardless of the type of source (Bulgren, et al., 2007).

The theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner supported the findings of these studies regarding how students with varying cognitive abilities understand the past. Vygotsky, for example, recognized that prior knowledge could serve as a barrier to student learning (Miller, 2002). Similarly, Piaget discussed disequilibrium where students negotiate the relationship between prior knowledge and new information (Yilmaz, 2008). Therefore, the findings about how students rate events as historically significant supports these theorists’ conclusions about the importance of engaging students in conversations about their prior knowledge and how their cultural influences and other sources of information might shape it. In addition, Vygotsky’s suggestion to use strategies such as modeling, explanations, discussions,
and collaboration (Gauvain & Cole, 1997) may aid students in the College Prep World History classes who need support in reading and analyzing different types of sources.

The findings in these various sources were aligned with constructivist theory regarding cultural influences. They also were relevant to my research interests. To learn how students view and interpret history through interviews or journal writing may provide insights into how to better develop their historical thinking skills and may provide for a learning environment in which conversations about historical understanding can take place. Likewise, it may help with the internalization process of historical thinking skills and the consideration of the best teaching methods to achieve these goals.

**The Effect of Instructional Strategies on the Learning of the Past**

Instructional strategies for the teaching of the past are discussed in the third body of literature and are in large part the culmination of the previous two sections on the learning of the past. In addition, some of the studies cited here complement the fourth section of this literature review regarding the rationale and impact of using student voice to inform instructional strategies.

Writing about the instruction of historical skills, Bain (2008) stressed that many students already use historical thinking skills but need teacher guidance to master them. To help students achieve proficiency in these areas, Bain recommended using writing, the use of artifacts, and historical thinking strategies. In his own teaching, Bain asked his secondary school students to use journals because he believed that, “Informal writing or thinking on paper allows students to explore connections, speculate about historical phenomena, and develop understandings of the past” (p.162). Through journal writing, students can record their own thoughts, keep track of changes in their thinking and can free-write on a topic, reading, or historical problem posed by
the teacher. In an effort to create dialogue between students and readings, Bain’s students used a two-column note-taking strategy in their journals; using one column for paraphrasing and the other for student responses to the text. He also directed students to share their journals with their peers in an effort to get feedback. As they practiced recording and sharing their thinking, students had the opportunity to critique each other’s work and thought processes. This approach helped his students’ understand historical context, empathy, and assess historical significance.

In addition to journal writing, Bain (2008) also directed students to create a time capsule to help them evaluate historical significance. As a class, students created a list of criteria that they used to choose the artifacts they contributed. This list was visible in the room and used throughout the year as they studied different events. It also helped students evaluate the importance of historical accounts and compare them to historians’ arguments about the same event. Bain found that “At times, students discover fundamental interpretive conflicts among historians by applying their charts” (p.164). This contributed to conversations about how historians labeled events as “significant”. As students habitually used this tool, one student reported in his journal, “I find that I am often using the institutions and rules of significance on a daily basis, without even thinking” (p. 164).

Finally, similar to the use of student feedback and journal writing, Bain (2008) also asked students’ to take on roles such as “questioner” as they read sources with their peers to examine and question the texts they read. Bain concluded from using these techniques that students came to view history as more that just memorizing facts. Students reported that they liked being able to explore the history they were studying because they looked at it from various view points rather than being told what happened by their teacher. As students internalized these processes, they began to approach texts with a more critical eye.
Bain’s (2008) teaching experiences and thinking were relevant to my interests as a researcher and educator. Not only did he integrate historical thinking processes in a way that helped students internalize the skills, as Vygotsky suggests is so important, but he did so in a way that appealed to my research interests. Asking students to record their thinking, create class criteria for examining texts, and track these processes as they go, seemed an interesting approach to monitoring students’ progress in the acquisition of historical thinking skills. In addition, the process of creating a classroom vocabulary, as Bain’s students did, is similar to Tishman, Perkins, and Jay’s (1995) discussion about a “language of thinking” in the classroom “and how the language used by the teacher and students in the classroom can work to encourage more high-level thinking” (p.3). Such strategies can improve the skills of students’ of various cognitive abilities.

Akin to Bain’s (2008) study, Kohlmeier (2005) discussed the impact of having students’ explore and improve their historical thinking skills through various instructional prompts. Seeking to examine how ninth graders could develop their examination of primary sources through a three step process of mind-mapping notes, participating in a Socratic seminar, and writing a historical narrative, Kohlmeier (2005) hoped that students historical knowledge, empathy, and evaluation of historical significance would improve. After students’ received primary sources from various time periods, they created reading webs to identify the author’s point of view and record the information that they identified as most important. The Socratic seminar that followed provided students with the opportunity “to seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through rigorously thoughtful dialogue” (p. 505) rather than memorizing isolated facts. Finally, the writing of a historical narrative allowed students to
practice how historians piece together information from various sources and their own prior knowledge.

Similar to Bain’s (2008) teaching strategies, Kohlmeier (2005) directed her students’ to use journals to keep track of their thinking process as they worked with each instructional prompt. Kohlmeier found that, “In each of the individual teaching strategies, their historical thinking abilities became more sophisticated” (p.507), a result that she attributed to using these strategies concurrently rather than separately. In addition, through thorough analysis of the students’ historical narratives, Kohlmeier (2005) found that students’ thinking became more in-depth as they moved from treating their sources as descriptors of the time to using them as comparative pieces to assess their historical significance. Furthermore, students were able to identify gaps in their previous knowledge and misconceptions they held about specific time periods. Finally, she found that students became increasingly comfortable with critically analyzing documents that helped them learn more about the time period they were studying. Kohlmeier’s findings were relevant to my research interests in that I was constantly looking for new pedagogical strategies to help students in the College Prep history classes improve their historical thinking skills. As a result, it would be interesting to explore if any of the strategies used by Kohlmeier in her study, could help students in my College Prep class.

In the context of developing students’ empathy, Foster (1999) discussed giving students historical problems to help them understand past events. Historical empathy helps students to distinguish between past and present so they do not evaluate the past through today’s standards. In his study, Foster challenged students to empathize with Neville Chamberlain and the decisions he made while negotiating with Hitler during World War II. In Foster’s research, rather than having students “imagine” (p. 19) they were in someone else’s shoes, they were “required to
understand the events that shaped his decision, to appreciate the context in which he worked, and to have knowledge of the consequences of his actions. Above all, students [were] required, . . . . to understand, explain, and evaluate” (p.19). As with Kohlmeier’s (2005) research, Foster’s (1999) study regarding students’ experiences with historical empathy was also relevant to my research interests. Historical empathy, as was mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, is an important aspect of historical understanding. It helps students to understand the ideas, values, and beliefs of various peoples. It is only with this understanding that students can assess the decisions and actions made by those in the past. Therefore, to understand how students in my College Prep World History classes were to assess these decisions and actions would be a helpful step in assessing their historical understanding of the past.

Finally, although literature regarding student understanding of the past is fairly extensive, recommendations for specific instructional strategies for students with learning disabilities was limited. Nonetheless, De La Paz and MacArthur (2003) suggested identifying main ideas from various sources, the use of mnemonic devices to remember information, and study guides. Likewise, De La Paz, Morales, and Winston, (2007) offered solutions to reading challenges by suggesting reading question prompts, scaffolding, and teacher modeling. In a mixed-method study of 16 tenth grade students with mild learning disabilities, Mastropieri, et al. (2003) contributed to their work by comparing the effectiveness of peer tutoring versus teacher directed guided notes. During the course of a nine-week quarter, students experienced one of these two teaching strategies from the same special educator. Students that participated in the peer tutoring class were often paired with a peer who was a higher-performing reader.

As previously mentioned in the first section of this literature review, Mastropieri et al.’s (2003) study was concerned with teacher expectations of students’ abilities to read for
comprehension across various texts. The goal of their research design was to find if either method improved content comprehension. From their study, they found that students who participated in peer tutoring “significantly outperformed those who participated in the teacher directed [instruction] . . . on content area tests” (p. 52). In addition, students in the tutoring class were allowed the opportunity to master strategies such as summarization of sources before moving on to a new skill. Students also reported that summarizing each paragraph helped them learn how to ask and answer comprehension questions. Although students’ oral-reading fluency did not improve, students in the tutoring-condition performed better independently when they used the summarization strategy and in remembering the steps of this process.

These studies regarding effective instructional strategies for the learning of the past, coupled with Vygotsky’s theory, helped me to think about the importance of using the more knowledgeable other. This approach can effectively use student-teacher and student-student dialogue to solve problems and improve comprehension of content. In addition, this dialogue can take the form of journal writing, which also allows students to reflect on their own learning processes and growth as they engage with historical content and higher-order thinking skills. Likewise, the strategies mentioned in this section can help with the internalization process as students engage in multiple forms of activities such as historical writing and Socratic seminars that are aimed at improving historical thinking skills. The use of a variety of instructional methods also supports Vygotsky’s theory that students with varying cognitive abilities can participate in a learning environment suited to their needs. Therefore, the instructional strategies presented in this section provided a basis for my own research interests. The use of journal, writing with the rationale for using student voice offered in the next section, provide a foundation to access student cognitive processing when they engaged in historical thinking. In
addition, the three step process employed by both Bain (2008) and Kohlmeier (2005) provided methods to scaffold through the use of various instructional tools that would help students with different cognitive abilities become more proficient in historical thinking skills. Also, through the teaching of various strategies, students would be able to better negotiate the appropriate approach for specific learning tasks (Beyer, 2008; Greene, 1994).

Incorporating Student Voice in the Learning Process in History Education

The fourth body of literature addressed student voice in the learning process in history education. The literature addressed implications for student achievement, motivation, and knowledge about learning styles through the viewpoints of both students and teachers. Although the research regarding student voice is in its infancy, Rudduck’s (2002) statement acknowledged its importance: “Given the strength of teachers’ testimony that consultation can ‘work’ for pupils it is ironic that is has been so slow to make its way into mainstream education” (p. 129). In addition, since much of the research thus far has been generalizable, further research regarding students’ learning experiences in the College Prep World History classes would be informative to teaching the study of the past. To assess whether student perspectives regarding motivation, learning styles, and achievement influence teacher practices, a review of the literature regarding the philosophy behind, and relevancy of, seeking student feedback was examined. Likewise, an understanding of student and teacher perspectives also provided a context for how teacher practices were affected by student input.

Rationale for student voice. Sands, Guzman, Stephens, and Boggs (2007) captured the underlying theme regarding the philosophy behind using student voice in their citation of Cook-Sather (2002): “As long as we exclude student perspectives from our conversations about schooling and how it needs to change, our efforts at reform will be based on an incomplete
picture of life in classrooms and schools and how that life could be improved” (p. 1).

Contributing to the rationale for the use of student voice, Rudduck (2002) argued that current schools do not reflect the types of students we are educating today. In his discussion about Generation Y, a generation with early access to computers and instant information, Rudduck (2002) reflected upon their development as young adults who have developed networking and analysis tools that need to be incorporated in the educational practices of teachers. He warned that if this is ignored educators risk student disengagement from learning.

In addition, advocates for educating students in democratic principles have provided a rationale for the use of student voice. Allowing students to express their opinions regarding their educational experiences fosters the belief that their opinions matter both within and outside of the context of school. This is particularly true if their voices are not only acknowledged but if teachers use their suggestions to make changes (Cook-Sather, 2006; Lincoln, 1995; Sands et al., 2007). Finally, as Rudduck (2002) suggested, providing students with the opportunity to give feedback allows them to feel connected to their school community, helps with self-esteem and their views of self-worth, and allows them to be more reflective about their own learning.

The rationale for using student voice had implications for comprehending how students in my ninth grade College Prep World History classes would understand the past. From a theoretical perspective, the rationale for using student voice is supported by constructivist pedagogy, which advocates for students to construct their own meaning during the learning process (Rodgers, 2006). The process of internalization that Vygotsky discussed in his developmental theory also is relevant to instructing students in content and historical thinking skills. To accurately study the past, students have to acquire and apply skills such as empathy, analysis, and causation. It has been my experience that the internalization of these skills has
proven to be difficult for students in my ninth grade College Prep World History classes. Seeking student feedback during and after skill instruction may provide insights into why students acquire these skills to varying degrees. Adding to this, and as Rudduck (2002) suggested, using technological tools that students are familiar with, may help with the acquisition of skills and content. Students can provide teachers with feedback regarding the usefulness of various technological tools during the learning process. Therefore, incorporating student feedback as a part of my research design may shed light on how students in my College Prep classes understood the past, how they internalized historical thinking skills, and the success of various instructional methods.

**Student perspective.** As research has evolved over the last twenty years about student voice, the opportunity for first hand accounts from students regarding achievement, motivation, and learning styles has emerged (Cook-Sather, 2006; DeFur & Korinek, 2010; O’Connell-Schmakel, 2008; Rudduck, 2002; Sands, et al., 2007). The research regarding this literature identified various types of students: those with and without learning disabilities, those labeled as having behavioral issues, and those from different socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, research in this area covered a range of topics, based on students’ feedback, such as the use of technology and instructional strategies. These insights provided a foundation for how the use of student voice can apply to the learning process in history education.

In O’Connell-Schmakel’s (2008) study of 67 seventh graders in four urban schools in the Midwest, she found that her research regarding student perspectives on motivation and achievement fell under two categories: *motivational instruction* and *motivational support*. For motivational instruction, students reported on the connection between “fun” in learning and their degree of motivation, interest, and achievement levels. Specifically, O’Connell-Schmakel
recommended playing games to help in the remembering of content. During this study, students repeatedly commented on the differences between their junior high and elementary experiences, where during the latter they played more games and had more fun. Students also suggested improving the use of class time, the need for more individual help, appropriate challenges based on learning styles, the use of student feedback, the need for modernized learning materials such as textbooks and more technology, and group work which students thought made the material more fun and interesting while learning from their peers. In terms of being challenged, students commented on the need for less repetition and bookwork and instead for more cognitively challenging work through the use of demanding activities.

O’Connell-Schmakel’s (2008) study reflected themes that emerged in the literature regarding student perspectives on motivation and achievement. Rudduck (2002) for example, cited student interpretations about teacher attitudes towards those who are known for causing trouble but are trying to change. One student believed that his teacher always remembered the “bad things” (p. 128) he had done. Another student stated that even though his grades and behavior improved, teachers seemed unwilling to compliment him because he felt they did not think he changed. Whether these perceptions are accurate or not, these insights provide teachers with student perspectives and give them an opportunity to examine their interactions with students. Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) study of reluctant learners at an alternative high school complements Rudduck’s (2002) work. In their research, they defined reluctant learners as students “who possess the ability to achieve. They do not struggle with reading or math on most school assignments. In spite of their abilities, however they choose not to participate in school learning experiences” (p.35). In their study, Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) interviewed four male high school students from a low socio-economic neighborhood regarding their
disengagement in school. Students cited the following reasons: the relevance of activities as they related to their own lives, the relationship between these activities and their personal goals, lack of understanding instructions and assignments, and negative student-teacher relationships.

DeFur and Korinek’s (2010) research also reemphasized students’ perceptions about teacher instruction and meeting student needs. During their interviews of seventy-four students from both rural and suburban school districts, students offered their perspectives on teaching. Their sentiments echoed those of the students in O’Connell-Schmakel’s (2008) study regarding the connection between making learning fun and their ability to do well. To this end, during DeFur and Korinek’s study (2010), students suggested the use of experiments, increased hands-on learning, and the use of act-it-outs to bring content to life. Students also suggested using more group work and being more active in class to make instruction more engaging. Such recommendations echoed those in Kinchin’s (2004) study where 349 secondary school students in England were asked to rate their preferences for either constructivist or objectivist curriculum approaches. Through their evaluation of concept cartoons that reflected these two teaching practices, the majority of students preferred the constructivist approach to learning as being “more interesting, more effective and allowing the students to have greater ownership of their learning” (p. 307). Such feedback regarding student perception about instruction I provide and whether or not it is meeting their needs would be interesting to learn.

While much of the literature does not distinguish between students with and without learning disabilities, the research of DeFur and Korinek (2010) and Cook-Sather (2002) does. DeFur and Korinek (2010), in their study previously mentioned, reported how some students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) wanted their teachers to understand their educational needs.
Students were also under the impression that some of their teachers did not know about their IEPs, what it contained, and/or did not trust the student to know what it said.

These studies provide revelations important to the learning process and how teacher access to student feedback can influence learning outcomes. O’Connell-Schmakel’s (2008) study in light of Vygotsky’s developmental theory sheds light on the importance of teacher-student relationships during the learning process. Vygotsky discusses the teacher and their role as a more knowledgeable other. Student interpretations of how teachers feel about them can enhance or interfere with the learning process. Likewise, teacher awareness of student perceptions can help acknowledge and break down the barriers to building a positive working relationship with students. Daniels and Arapostathis’ (2005) study that interviewed students who were disengaged were relevant to my concerns for students from low socio-economic backgrounds in our school. Understanding their cultural environment both at home and the high school could inform my own thinking about their learning experiences. As Vygotsky suggested, one’s cultural environment influences how and to what extent students acquire knowledge and skills (Miller, 2002).

Finally, the suggestions that emerged during these various studies about instruction and students’ motivation to learn were informative in terms of my possible research interests. Using student voice, either through discussion or journal writing, as a means to assess helpful teaching strategies may prove to be an informative way to evaluate student acquisition of content knowledge and historical thinking skills. This also could be particularly useful for the teaching of students in College Prep classes who need more content and skill support. Limited research exists in this area. In addition, student feedback could provide the valuable information about their daily classroom experiences and to what extent their educational needs are met.
The student perspectives offered by these various research studies are helpful in improving teacher practices and relationships with students. In addition to considering student voice regarding teacher practices, the literature considers teacher perspectives regarding its usefulness in their classroom.

**Teacher perspective.** While gaining insights into student perspectives about achievement, motivation, and learning styles has been easy for researchers, teacher willingness and comfort in soliciting such information has had mixed results. Rodgers’ (2006), in her study regarding *descriptive feedback*, discussed how it provided teachers with insights to student learning that is not necessarily apparent through observation. While this is a classroom practice that will be discussed further in the next subsection, Rodgers reminded teachers to avoid blaming themselves or students if they do not learn the material as planned. In using student feedback as a means to gauge student learning, one teacher expressed a clearer understanding of the differences among her students and how they interpret her instructions. Rodgers also emphasized that students who are typically quiet in class have an outlet for which they can voice their opinions and participate in discussions about learning.

While Rodgers’ (2006) teacher-interviews reflected a more positive experience with seeking student voice, the research study conducted by McIntyre, Pedder, and Rudduck (2005) was not as conclusive. While teachers expressed discomfort with and acceptance of student feedback, McIntyre et al.’s study did yield some positive responses. Some teachers acknowledged that lesson goals needed to be more explicit, that recommendations by students regarding new initiatives helped to determine whether or not to repeat them, and that feedback reaffirmed their own instincts about improving some of their practices. McIntyre et al.’s study
highlights how teacher perceptions of their own intentions and goals may not be internalized or realized by students.

Teacher insights about the use of student feedback revealed during these studies were relevant to my research about how students in my College Prep history classes understand the past. While teachers create lessons and activities to achieve learning goals and outcomes, student feedback about the degree to which they help to achieve these goals would be informative. Possible research areas may revolve around using an activity to teach a particular historical skill or content area and then seek feedback from students about the learning process and the degree to which they found the lesson helpful.

**Classroom practices.** As referenced in the previous section, the actual soliciting, acknowledgement, and implementation of student feedback can be intimidating to teachers. Rudduck (2002) contended that teachers who buy-in to the value of student voice have the following to gain: greater insight into student abilities, new perspectives on student learning, readiness to examine their own practice in light of feedback, and a reinvigoration for the teaching profession. Rodgers (2006) offered ways in which teachers can prepare themselves and establish a climate for student feedback. In doing so Rodgers, stated that such feedback can take place during or after an activity, individually, or in groups where teachers can ask the following questions: “1) What did you learn? 2) How do you know you learned it? 3) What got in the way of your learning? 4) What helped your learning? 5) How did you feel?” (p. 219). While the feedback can be given either orally or written, the literature suggests benefits to both forums. Written feedback provides every student with a voice; oral feedback results in a discussion that allows students to hear others’ ideas. Similarly, Lincoln (1995) recommended using the Socratic method of asking open-ended questions, which allows students to use personal experiences from
both within and outside of the classroom to reflect on their learning. Rodgers (2006) advocated that by viewing students as partners in the learning process, teachers would focus less on curriculum restraints and more on the degrees to which students are learning.

Finally, the literature from Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) and Delpit (1988) offered insights into how teachers of reluctant learners and students-of-color can learn from student voice. In terms of reluctant learners, Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) recommended that teachers appeal to students’ talents by creating learning opportunities. In addition, they recommended maintaining a challenging learning environment while preventing students from getting discouraged and becoming disengaged.

Delpit’s (1988) work regarding students-of-color is framed within the “culture of power” that exists within society. In defining the culture of power, Delpit referred to “ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting” (p.283) as cultural rules that have been established by those who have power, the middle and upper classes. As a result, Delpit argued that, in terms of education, middle and upper class students outperform non-middle class students because the culture of the schools non-middle class students attend is based on the culture of power established by the middle and upper classes. Therefore, Delpit contended that this “culture of power” affects the education of students-of-color and low-income students and that this must be recognized within classrooms to ultimately create a more equal society. In order to do so, Delpit encouraged teachers to understand this culture and how students-of-color receive instruction and perceive successful teachers. Delpit also argued that whereas students-of-color are use to receiving certain directives from caregivers, students from white, middle and upper classes receive different directives from their caregivers. Therefore, Delpit (1988) stated that these differences between students’ homes and cultures could inhibit their interpretation of
instruction and meaning, and ultimately their learning outcomes. As a result, it is important that students are “taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors” (p. 296). Delpit also contended that only those that share a common culture with students-of-color and poor students could help to establish a curriculum that meets their needs.

The current literature acknowledges how student perspectives provided important insights into student motivation, learning styles, and achievement. Student voice allows teachers to hear from all members of their class and treat each student as an individual learner who has a stake in his or her own learning. The use of student voice is also validated by their connections to developmental theory. Delpit’s (1988) revelations about students-of-color and their interpretation of classroom language are relevant to Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner’s ideas regarding cultural influences on the learning process. O’Connell-Schmakel’s (2008) study emphasized the importance of Vygotsky’s more knowledgeable other and how teacher-student relationships can influence student acquisition of content and students’ perceptions of themselves as learners.

Student reflection on the use of learning time and activities in O’Connell-Schmakel’s (2008) study is also relevant in that students can provide meaningful feedback regarding instructional methods that best work for their learning style. In addition, the preceding suggestions and strategies that are offered in this literature, informed my own possible research interests. For example, Rodgers (2006) suggestions about questions to use when seeking student feedback provided a helpful guideline to assess student acquisition of content and skills. In
addition they informed my research interests mentioned in the previous section, about seeking student feedback regarding skills and/or content experiences following a specific activity.

**The Arguments For and Against Academic Tracking**

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the topic of academic *tracking* in schools does go beyond the scope of this research study. I felt, however, that it was important to address the issues regarding this matter, due to its practice in the secondary school where this research study took place. In doing so, a brief overview of how tracking was used in our high school is described, along with the definition of tracking and related terms that are used in the literature. This is followed by an overview of the arguments both for and against tracking.

Despite the debate around the practice of tracking and the notion that, according to its critics, it is neither effective nor equitable (Ansalone, 2009; Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995; Hallinan, 1994; Hyland, 2006; Oakes, 1992; Rubin, 2006, 2007; Slavin, 1990), it is still a prevailing practice in many schools (Ansalone, 2009; Ansalone & Biafora, 2010; Archbald & Keleher, 2008) including the high school where this study took place. While there was ongoing discussion among the high school faculty and within the Social Studies Department specifically, regarding its effectiveness and fairness, at present, it was a practice that was still employed. The high school had three tracks: Honors, Advanced College Prep, and College Prep. The Honors class is considered the most rigorous, with the College Prep course designed, as previously described, to focus on content and skill support, specific but not limited to the areas of reading, writing, and higher-order thinking. To aid students in the course selection process, at the end of each academic year, teachers explained the three tracking levels specific to each content area and gave recommendations as to which level students should enroll. While teachers recommended students for these placements, ultimately it was the parents and students who had
the final decision as to which track they chose. Regardless of their selection, this tracking system was flexible in that options existed to choose different tracks per each subject matter, to change tracks during the first term of the school year, and under special circumstances, and to change tracks as they signed up for courses for the following academic year. As a result, students were not permanently assigned to one track across all subjects for all four years of their high school experience.

The review of literature regarding tracking revealed different definitions for the practice, often using the terms *tracking* and *ability grouping* interchangeably (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992). As Oakes (1992) stated, “we’ve learned that tracking practices are diverse, complex, and dynamic. In fact, we use the term tracking quite generally to refer to a whole range of ability-related grouping practices in schools” (p.12). Therefore, both the practice of tracking and ability grouping are often generally defined as the practice of grouping students based on their ability (Ansalone & Biafora, 2010; Gamoran, et al., 1995; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Kulik & Kulik, 1982). In addition, while tracking was designed to be a permanent academic placement where students were appointed to academic or vocational tracks (Hallinan, 1994), the practice of tracking has become more flexible in that students are often allowed to choose their track based on academic subjects (Slavin, 1990; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Therefore, for the purpose of this literature review, unless otherwise noted, these terms are used interchangeably and within the context of the general definition; that students are grouped based on their ability. It is also important to note that much of the literature contained terms such as “lower-track”, “middle track”, and “higher-track”, and “low ability”, “high ability”, and “gifted” to refer to and distinguish between different track levels and student ability. While Fiedler, Lange, and Winebrenner (2002) argued that the use of these terms perpetuate the idea of elitism that some
associate with them, since they are common terms used in the literature, I used them within this context as well.

In the literature review that follows regarding the debate over the practice of tracking, a brief overview for each argument is provided, followed by a discussion of the major themes that supported each side. Also, while it is limited, research specific to its practice in social studies classes is also presented.

**Arguments for tracking.** The literature regarding the benefits of tracking revealed that proponents believe it is the most effective way to educate students (Ansalone, 2009; Gamoran, et al., 1995; Hallinan, 1994; Hyland, 2006; Oakes, 1992; Rubin, 2006, 2007; Slavin, 1990). In support of this perspective, are different stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents, students, and advocates for gifted students. While arguments opposing the practice considered tracking to be among other things, inequitable (Oakes, 1992; Rubin, 2006; Slavin, 1990), Fiedler, et al. (2002), countered this argument by stating, “equality in education does not require that all students have exactly the same experiences. Rather, education in a democracy promises that everyone will have an opportunity to actualize their potential, to learn as much as they can” (p. 111). This issue, along with the perspectives of the stakeholders and the concerns for students’ self-perceptions, achievement, and motivation are discussed in further detail in the subsections that follow.

**Stakeholders.** Educators, parents, and advocates for gifted student all provided insights into why they supported the practice of tracking. As students are stakeholders as well, their perspectives are included in the review of literature on student self-perceptions.

**Educator perspectives.** Both teachers and administrators had specific views about why the practice of tracking should be continued in schools. First, the literature regarding teacher
perspectives on tracking discussed their concern for meeting student needs and what is most beneficial to student learning. Teachers, for example, supported the notion that it is easier to teach students of different abilities when they are grouped homogeneously, rather than heterogeneously (Peltier, 1991; Slavin, 1990), because it is easier to plan for, accommodate, and teach students with similar academic needs (Ansalone & Biafora, 2010; Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Oakes, 1992; Peltier, 1991; Slavin, 1990). Furthermore, teachers with experiences of teaching both high ability and mixed-ability classes supported grouping because they believed most students benefit from being in distinct classroom environments (Adams-Byers, Whitsell, & Moon, 2004; Oakes, 1992). For example, teachers of mixed-ability classrooms reported that the lack of high ability students in their classrooms allowed other students to shine both socially and academically, while teachers of gifted students reported that these students are best served both academically and socially in their own classes as well (Adams-Byers, et al., 2004). Therefore, teachers argued against the notion that high-ability students would socially benefit from mixed-ability classrooms and instead argued that high-ability students may act immaturely in those settings because they were, “forced to function in a classroom environment that is not compatible with their high abilities, specialized interests, and advanced developmental levels” (Adams-Byers, et al., p. 8, 2004).

While teachers’ perspectives reflected teaching practices and student learning, administrators expressed concerns for the political ramifications of omitting the practice in school districts (Oakes, 1992). As a result, tracking is often preferred by both public and private school principals faced with, “the almost impossible tasks of balancing stretched budgets, enhancing academic standards, and maintaining student enrollment” (Ansalone & Biafora, p. 229, 2010). Therefore, offering the practice of tracking to parents provided them with greater
academic choices for their children, deterring them from leaving the school for another that offers upper-level courses (Ansalone & Biafora, 2010).

**Parent perspective.** In addition to the views of some educators, the literature showed strong support among parents for the continued use of tracking. For example, Ansalone and Biafora’s (2010) findings showed that both parents of children in upper and lower-tracks supported the practice. The parents of children in the upper track expressed concern that their children would not do as well if they were placed in heterogeneous classes while parents of children in lower-tracks worried that their children would not receive the “‘one-to-one’ and ‘individualized attention’ as well as ‘extra care’ they believe is provided in lower-track classes” (p. 239). Parents of gifted children agreed with these sentiments, believing that tracking provided a more suitable classroom environment for their child’s academic and personal needs.

**Advocates for gifted students.** Advocates for gifted students also supported keeping tracking in schools. For example, Fiedler, et al. (2002) criticized current researcher recommendations for heterogeneous grouping and current research studies suggesting tracking is not beneficial for students, because the studies did not include gifted students in their research. Also, in addressing the issue that ability grouping discriminates along racial and ethnic lines, Fiedler, et al. (2002) agreed that this process has been inequitable, but believed that teachers were becoming better trained to identify gifted students and that they are being encouraged to use other methods besides standardized test scores to assess whether students belonged in these programs. Adding to this, VanTassel-Baska (1992) argued that federal resources for the gifted have been assigned to help identify and support poorly represented groups in gifted programs. As a result of the efforts to make gifted programs equitable, advocates for gifted students believed this is not a reason to eliminate the practice.
Student self-perceptions and academic experiences. Finally, proponents of tracking argued that student self-perceptions and academic experience, which are often intertwined, benefited from being grouped homogeneously. In terms of self-perception, the literature showed that some students, when grouped homogeneously, had an improved sense of self and school (Kulik & Kulik, 1982) and more specifically had a more positive outlook towards different subject matters (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; VanTassel-Baska, 1992). Proponents also contended that mixed-ability grouping could be detrimental to both gifted and non-gifted students as gifted students could develop feelings of superiority over their peers (Fiedler, et al., 2002), while “less capable students could suffer emotional as well as educational damage from daily contact with brighter peers” (Peltier, p. 246, 1991). Furthermore, in discussing the impact of heterogeneous grouping, Fiedler, et al. (2002) raised concerns that gifted students placed in heterogeneous classrooms in which they have already learned the materials being taught, may be asked by teachers to help their peers, which could lower gifted students self-esteem. Adding to this were concerns by Adams-Byers, et al. (2004), who argued that in addition to lowered self-esteem, such placements could lead to bullying by their peers, boredom, lack of motivation, and feeling misunderstood by their peers and teachers. Consequently, “these negative encounters often lead highly able students to experience isolation and feelings of frustration or depression or to attempt to fit in by hiding their exceptional abilities” (p. 8).

In addition to tracking’s impact on student self-perceptions, the literature also revealed its effect on student academic experiences. Proponents of tracking argued that high ability students perform best when they are tested and motivated by their peers (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Slavin, 1990) and contrary to the belief of tracking critics, placing gifted students in lower-ability classrooms would not improve the academic achievement of lower-tracked students (Fiedler, et
Al., 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1992). Adding to this, Adams-Byers, et al. (2002) contended that the structure of the classroom differed for students with different cognitive abilities and high ability learners’ benefitted from more flexible learning environments than lower-ability learners. Their research showed that high ability students benefited from these flexible environments academically. Complementing these sentiments is the argument that higher-ability students work at a faster pace and are able to take on more challenging academic materials than other students (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992). And therefore, the achievements of this population decline when they are in heterogeneous classrooms.

In the literature, proponents of tracking argued that it is in the best interest of teachers, districts, and students of all abilities to continue with the practice. The many critics of tracking, who also have students’ interests in mind, however, challenge this viewpoint. Their arguments are presented in the following section.

**Arguments against tracking.** As alluded to in the introduction of this section, much of the literature suggested that the policy of tracking was in large part, detrimental to students (Ansalone, 2009; Cooper, 1996; Hallam & Ireson, 2006; Oakes, 1992). To that end, critics contended that the process of detracking schools should begin due to its impact on students along race and class lines, student classroom experiences and achievement, student self-perceptions, and on stakeholders in general. These themes, along with the perspectives of stakeholders are discussed in the subsections that follow, and while the impact on school districts is discussed in its own stakeholder subsection, the discussion of student perspectives on the matter are included throughout.

**Racial and class segregation.** One of the most common arguments critics have against tracking is that it reproduces race and class segregation due to the overrepresentation of African
American, Latino, and low-income students in lower-tracked classes (Hallam & Ireson, 2007; Hallinan, 1994; Hyland, 2006; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Oakes, 1992; Rubin, 2006, 2007; Slavin, 1990). Oakes (1992) raised concerns about the criteria used for assigning students to different tracks, writing, “Qualitative studies suggest that race and social class influence secondary school placement over and above achievement because students from different backgrounds receive different information, advice and attention from counselors and teachers” (p.14). In citing one study to support this suggestion, Oakes noted that counselors and teachers placed Asian and white students in higher-level classes, whereas Latino students, who scored similarly on achievement tests, were placed in lower-tracked classes.

Also concerned with tracking’s impact on race and class, Lewis and Diamond (2015) conducted a four-year study at Riverview High School, an affluent and diverse school district in the Midwest, in an effort to learn why black and Latino/a students lagged behind their peers. At the time of the study, Riverview classes were divided into three levels - basic, honors, and advanced placement (AP) - and course placement was based on students’ grades, test scores, and teacher recommendations, which parents could override if they wished. Lewis and Diamond found a disproportionate number of white students in honors and AP courses, and African American and Latino students in low-track courses. As a result of these placements, Lewis and Diamond argued that students were having very different high school experiences, and for African American and Latino students in particular, this could contribute to negative outcomes.

As a result of such findings that students have very different educational experiences, Hyland (2006) expressed concerns that “the demographics of tracked classes function to contribute to the ideology that intelligence is somehow linked to race and culture” (p.65).
The concerns about tracking contributing to race and class segregation also extended to student classroom experiences and student achievement.

**Classroom experiences and student achievement.** In addition to their concerns over race and class segregation caused by tracking, critics also cited the disparity in educational experiences students received across tracks (Gamoran, et al., 1995; Hallinan, 1994; Rubin, 2006, 2007). As for disparity in lower-tracks, opponents cited the quality of curriculum, student interaction, and teacher experience and expectations as issues (Gamoran, et al., 1995; Rubin, 2006). In terms of curriculum quality, teachers of low-track classes tend to focus more on basic skill work, repetition, and more simplistic topics (Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Oakes, 1992) all while doing so at a slower pace (Hallinan, 1994; Rubin, 2006; Slavin, 1990). Furthermore, teachers focused more on students following the rules (Oakes, 1992) and more time on discipline (Gamoran, et al., 1995). In Boaler, Wiliam, and Brown’s (2000) study of setted (tracked) Math classes in the United Kingdom, students reported that they complained about how easy the work was and despite asking for more difficult work, those that finished early needed to sit and wait until the rest of their peers were done. It was also noted in the literature that teachers of low-track students were often less motivated, prepared, (Gamoran, et al., 1995) and held lower expectations of students in these tracks (Hallinan, 1994; Lewis & Diamond, 2015) which, according to Cooper’s (1996) findings, had not gone unnoticed by students.

The literature also revealed that many teachers did not want to teach lower-track classes (Ansalone, 2009; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Oakes, 1992; Slavin, 1990) and therefore, teachers with the least amount of experience often were assigned to them (Gamoran, et al., 1995; Oakes, 1992; Slavin, 1990). Consequently, the lack of motivation to teach lower-ability students resulted in a classroom environment where students “face low expectations for performance, and
have few positive behavioral models” (Slavin, p. 473, 1990), became less motivated and demoralized (Rubin, 2006), and were believed to be more prone to misconduct, poor attendance, dropout, and other social problems (Slavin, 1990). Boaler, et al.’s (2000) study supported these sentiments about the needs of students in low-track classes being met, as they found that not only were the Math classes assigned non-Mathematics teachers, but that it was common for students to have multiple teachers during the school year. Furthermore, despite the fact that the tracking system was flexible, whereby students could move tracks if they were improperly placed, students in the low-track “believed there to be little hope of moving to higher groups” (p. 639) because the only way to do so was to score relatively well with other students on their year end test, which they believed to be difficult because they were not taught the information needed to pass it. In addition, Yonezawa and Jones (2006) found, during their research study, that generally, students regardless of track level, were unsure how the process of tracking worked.

In comparison to the educational experiences in low-track classes, the quality of curriculum for students in high-tracks was found to be much more engaging and challenging, and to involve more difficult cognitive tasks, such as independent thinking (Oakes, 1992), and activities that required discussions, analysis, critique and creativity (Ireson and Hallam, 1999). Oakes (1992) contended that students in high-track classes were given more time to process information and teachers were more enthusiastic and better prepared. As a result, these teachers seemed to have a positive and encouraging relationship with their students (Oakes, 1992).

Despite the benefits of higher-tracked classes, critics of tracking were worried about the negative consequences of students being placed in them. For example, Hyland (2006) expressed concern, that due to the lack of diversity in higher-tracked classes, students in this track were not exposed to different perspectives. In addition, Boaler, et al.’s, (2000) study found that students
in higher-tracks often reported that teachers moved too quickly through the curriculum, modeled examples without giving students a thorough explanation, and were left behind if they were not finished with their work. Students were often told to work faster and, if they did not understand what was being taught, teachers would say they did not belong in the top set. As a result of their study, Boaler, et al.’s, (2000) indicated that students in both tracks reported their dislike for the policy of tracking and expressed that it had negatively affected both their understanding and feelings towards Math.

Specific to achievement, researchers found when comparing achievements made by students in different tracks while considering ability level, socioeconomic status, and other control variables, that generally the achievement gap grows between the students in top and low-tracks (Gamoran, et al., 1995; Slavin, 1990). Oakes (1992), specific to secondary students achievement in tracked classes, argued that students did not gain achievement advantage regardless of the track they were in compared to students in mixed-ability classes. Similarly, Slavin (1990), in discussing between-class ability grouping in secondary schools, stated that there was little or no effect on achievement based on standardized test scores. In terms of students in lower-tracked classes, Rubin (2006) argued that students assigned to lower-tracks did not do as well in school and scored lower on standardized tests than they would have if they were placed in mixed-ability classes. In addition, Slavin (1990) argued that students in low-tracks are less likely to attend college.

Finally, while there are very few studies on the effects of tracking in social studies classrooms, educators believed that it was the logical place to begin detracking as the goal of the social studies curriculum is to promote the acceptance of differences, teach the values of citizenship and democracy, and encourage critical thinking (Hyland, 2006; Rubin, 2007).
**Student self-perceptions.** While student-perceptions in many ways echoed their feedback on their experiences in the classroom, much of the literature emphasized the impact of tracking on student self-esteem, motivation, and attitudes towards school. More specifically, critics of tracking argued that for students in the low-tracks, what emerged were feelings of alienation, (Hallam & Ireson, 2006; Hallinan, 1994, Oakes, 1992), low self-esteem (Hallam & Ireson, 2006; Hallinan, 1994; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006), and poor attitudes towards school and its rules (Hallam & Ireson, 2006). Exacerbating or contributing to these feelings were that “rewards typically are given to higher-track students, which could further discourage or alienate lower-track students” (Hallinan, p.81, 1994) and students perceive that they are placed in lower-tracks because teachers do not believe in their academic ability (Hallinan, 1994).

Critics were also concerned with how ability groups could impact peer interaction (Hallam & Ireson, 2006; Oakes, 1992). For example, in referencing Oakes (1982, 1985), Hallam & Ireson (2006) “found that students in higher ability groups reported behavior between peers which was more supportive when compared with lower ability classes where pupils’ interactions were often characterized by hostility and anger” (p. 584). Therefore, it was believed that mixed-ability classrooms might alleviate this tension and provide a supportive environment where students with lower abilities could receive help and support from their high-ability peers (Hallam & Ireson, 2006). In addition, in Lewis and Diamond’s (2015) study, parents of students-of-color taking upper-level courses with mostly white students expressed concern about the “racial dynamics in those classes and how their children dealt with racial isolation once they got there” (p.106).
The literature also revealed that students in low-track classes often received less respect than students in higher-tracks (Hallinan, 1994). In a study of 5000 students in years 7-9 in 45 secondary schools in England, Hallam and Ireson’s (2007) found that students in low-tracks were extremely cognizant of the negative perceptions associated with being in these classes. This reinforced the concerns that tracking establishes both a social and academic hierarchy among students (Gamoran, et al., 1995; Hallam & Ireson, 2006; Hallinan, 1994), which is then perpetuated outside of school (Hyland, 2006).

**Stakeholders.** While much of what follows mirrors the arguments of administrators who support tracking, I thought it was important to include some of the issues raised by critics as an example of how pressure by stakeholders could negatively impact educational decision making. For example, Oakes (1992) considered the pressure placed by parents on school districts to be a negative aspect of the practice of tracking and its continued use. As stated by Oakes, because schools need to ensure the community’s trust and support, “tracking policies that provide advantages to more privilege students, even if they result in racial segregation within desegregated schools, are often exchanged for the political credit that more advantaged and involved parents bring to a school” (p. 19). Echoing this sentiment is Lewis and Diamond’s (2015) findings whereby school personnel described being pressured by white parents to keep the tracking system as is, and to place their children in higher-tracked courses or they would leave the school.

While the legitimacy of tracking is beyond the scope of this study, the issues regarding this debate are plentiful. Proponents, in citing the support for tracking by educators, parents, and advocates for gifted students, contend that tracking benefits all students and therefore it should continue, while critics argue that it promotes the re-segregation of schools and allows for the
disparity of educational experiences to the detriment of all students, but particularly those in the lower tracks, and therefore detracking of schools should begin. As a result of these different viewpoints and that tracking was practiced in the high school where this study took place, this topic lends itself to a future interest of study, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

**Conclusion**

The first four bodies of literature was a reflection of how cognitive development, students with various cognitive abilities, and instructional strategies affect students’ understanding of the past, along with how student voice can inform educators’ understanding of these processes to better shape instruction. The research designs of the studies discussed in this section were primarily qualitative in nature. While a number of them were within the field of historical understanding and the use of historical thinking tools, none of the research designs specifically focused on how students who need more content and skill support understand the past through the use of historical evidence. Therefore, these bodies of literature along with the theories of Vygotsky, Bruner, and Piaget, provided a basis for my problem of practice and research questions.

The preceding suggestions and strategies that are offered were helpful in thinking about my research interests. Using such strategies as journal writing, both for student reflection and as a means for monitoring student cognitive processes, could be beneficial to understand how various instructional methods influence student acquisition of and proficiency in historical thinking skills. In addition, using this method could also help to specifically address how students in my College Prep World History classes approached, interpreted, and accessed the ninth grade World History curriculum. Incorporating student voice into this process was an
appealing and relevant strategy to improve the students’ ability to understand the past along with my understanding of this process.

Finally, although it is beyond the scope of this research study, the fifth body of literature on tracking provided the potential for future research. Learning specifically how tracking at the high school affected my history students, would not only be beneficial on a teacher and department level, but important knowledge to share with the entire high school community.

Having reviewed the body of literature on cognitive development, student understanding of the past, and student voice in Chapters 1 and 2, Chapter 3 discusses the research design to address my research question. In this next chapter, the rationale for my research question, the methodology of my research design along with its validity and credibility, and my plan for data collection and analysis are described.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Research Question

After reviewing the literature on developmental theory, student voice, and student historical understanding, it became evident there existed very little literature that specifically examined how students placed in a ninth grade World History course, designed to offer more content and skill support, came to understand the past. Therefore, the following research question at the center of this research design was derived from the four original questions listed in the literature review section and addresses this research gap:

*How do ninth grade students placed in a College Prep World History class explain how they understand the past through the use of historical evidence?*

The question emerged from my problem of practice, the theoretical framework and the literature review and helped to fulfill my goal of understanding how students, who need more content and skill support, including but not limited to reading, writing, and higher-order thinking, understand the past. It also allowed me to focus on the historical concept, *evidence*, that is pertinent to the study of the past and student development of historical thinking skills. As one of the core concepts of historical understanding, historical evidence requires students to challenge prior conceptions of the past, and in doing so evaluate various sources for their credibility. The use of evidence in the study of the past also taps into other core concepts of historical understanding including time and sequence, continuity and change, historical significance, causation, and empathy. As described in the Literature Review, these skills help students to understand the past through the consideration of the progression of events over time, the context and connection among different variables in which change took place, the ideas, beliefs and values of various peoples under study, and the various factors that may have caused certain
outcomes. In addition, this question allowed for the use of student voice to inform my teaching practices and my understanding of how my students use, analyze, and evaluate historical evidence. In doing so, students participated in a variety of activities and then were given the opportunity to explain how these activities helped or hindered their ability to understand the past.

The research question was supported by the developmental theory of Lev Vygotsky with aspects of Piagetian and Brunerian ideas. Vygotsky’s idea about the role that a more knowledgeable other (Gauvain & Cole, 1997; Powell & Kalina, 2009), in this case a peer or teacher, plays in student understanding was pertinent to answering my research question and to learning how these interactions helped or hindered their ability to understand the past. Student vocalization of this process, linked to the use of student voice, shed light on how students in my College Prep World History classes engaged in this process. To this end, by incorporating student voice into this research design, classroom observations, interviews, surveys, and assessments were useful data collection tools.

Corresponding with Vygotsky’s ideas is Jerome Bruner’s (1977) belief that any student can comprehend complex concepts and tasks through appropriate instruction. Student feedback regarding these various activities provided insights into students’ ability to engage in more complex tasks to facilitate higher-order thinking through the use of historical evidence. In addition, this feedback provided data that informed my teaching practices.

**Methodology**

In order to answer the research question I used a qualitative action research approach. This approach made the most sense for the data I wanted to collect in order to understand my problem of practice, answer the research question, examine my data through a theoretical lens, and implement the research process itself.
The qualitative approach allowed for ninth grade students in my College Prep classes to offer their insights regarding how they understood the past as they used historical evidence. It gave them a stake in their own learning and required them to be reflective of their own cognitive processes. It also allowed for the collection of data to take place in my own classroom with students I had built a relationship with from the start of the 2011-2012 school year. This was particularly important for working with students in the College Prep history classes, some of whom have trouble building trusting relationships with adults. In this familiar setting, the goal was for students to feel comfortable providing honest feedback without being concerned about their grades or our student-teacher relationship. In addition, it allowed for flexibility in the creation and use of various data sources along with the opportunity to deviate from the original research design should new methods or activities better help to answer my research question (Creswell, 2009).

Since using student voice was fundamental to learning about how students in my College Prep class understood the past, an action research design within this qualitative approach best allowed for the implementation of my research plan. Complementing qualitative research, action research also allowed for data collection to take place in a comfortable, familiar environment where a student-teacher relationship had already developed. In addition to this flexibility, one of the most important aspects of action research is that it allows for both researcher and student reflection and collaboration. This sentiment was supported by Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) who stated, “Practitioner research has the potential for empowerment and the inclusion of a greater diversity of voices in educational policy and social change” (p. 6). Similarly, McIntyre, et al. (2005) reflected that students “can find it motivating to be consulted about how they can best be helped to learn and to be treated as active responsible members of the organizations in
which they work” (p. 150). During this research process, my students had the opportunity to share their reflections on how they understood the past through their use of historical evidence. This was particularly important as some students often express that they cannot “do history.” This collaborative classroom environment facilitated by action research gave students the opportunity to discuss their learning processes as they studied the past, and in turn, allowed me as the teacher/researcher to use and validate their feedback in the creation of future activities and assessments (Anderson, et al., 1994).

Specific to teacher reflection, since observation of student interaction with peers and classroom resources is a natural part of the teaching profession, action research provided this teacher/researcher with a “systematic and rigorous way to view this process of observation as a qualitative data collection technique” (Mills, p. 53, 2003). Therefore, I not only observed student experiences with historical evidence in their study of the past, but by playing the role that Mills (2003) describes as an active participant observer, I kept a written record of these observations as part of the data collection process. As a result of this qualitative action research approach, the data derived not only helped me to reflect on my own practice but, when shared with colleagues, may facilitate a dialogue about the teaching and learning experiences of students enrolled in the College Prep World History course.

Therefore, this study focused on student cognitive processes as they used historical evidence rather than the demonstration of student improvement over a specific period of time. This was evidenced by student feedback, through surveys and individual and focus group interviews, along with researcher memos and student work. As stated by Stringer (2007), “This type of exploration is designed not to gather concrete evidence or objective data but to reveal the reality that makes up people’s day-to-day experience, bringing their assumptions, views, and
beliefs, out in the open and making them available for reflection” (p. 66). Finally, the review of the literature regarding historical understanding not only revealed little research around my research question; it also highlighted that an action research design has not been used to study the understanding of the past for students who needed more content and skill support in World History classrooms. As a result, a qualitative action research approach not only provided me with insights as to how students in my College Prep class used historical evidence to understand the past; it immediately impacted my teaching practices.

**Site and participants.** This study took place in a ninth grade regular education World History classroom in a public school district west of Boston, Massachusetts. The research participants were ninth grade students enrolled in College Prep World History. The College Prep course was designed for students who needed more content and skill-based instruction in reading, writing, higher-order thinking, and the use of historical concepts such as historical evidence, empathy, and causation. The course covered the same World History curriculum as the other ninth grade history classes, but students receive more scaffolded instruction and in-class skill support. These classes had no more than sixteen students and, very often, had a Teacher’s Assistant to help with content acquisition and skill support both inside and outside of the classroom. Typically, the majority of students in the College Prep classes were on Individual Education Plans (IEPs). A total of nine students, eight girls and one boy, from the same College Prep class participated in this study.

In the past, I had generally found that students in the ninth grade College Prep World History classes were aware of their strengths and weaknesses and were vocal about their learning processes. Some could also be tentative when it came to trusting adults and building positive student-teacher relationships. Therefore, this study took place five months into the school year
when student-teacher relationships had been established, I had a sense of the students who were more comfortable communicating about their learning experiences, and I had an understanding of the students’ abilities. This information informed certain data collection methods such as the language I used to frame survey and one-on-one interviews questions. This was particularly important during the interviews to help ease any nervousness students might have experienced during their participation in them.

It is important to note that a reflective classroom environment was a consistent part of my teaching practices and, therefore, informal dialogue about student experiences in the classroom took place from the start of the school year. My specific research question regarding how students in my ninth grade College Prep classes understood the past through the use of historical evidence allowed me to formally gather feedback about their learning, through surveys and individual and focus group interviews. More specifically, during two contiguous units of study, students participated in different types of activities, interacted with various sources, and produced a variety of products, resulting in a number of opportunities to assess and seek feedback regarding student experiences with historical evidence.

When I used formal interviews to assess student experiences, I informed the students that these were different from impromptu classroom feedback discussions. I accounted for this by keeping these sessions relaxed. I created such a climate by using language students understood, not strictly following a script, and continuing to act like the teacher they interacted with everyday (Roulston, 2010). I also continuously reminded students during the study and specifically prior to interviews, that their feedback would not impact their grades or our student-teacher relationship. I demonstrated this by listening to and respecting student feedback, and verbally and physically showing students that I was interested in what they had to say and not offended.
by it. Since I know “body language, pauses and hesitations, and facial and verbal expressions all convey information” (Yin, p. 127, 2016), I was cognizant of the message I sent to students during data collection so as not to change our relationship and send the wrong message about their feedback.

Participants were also informed that they could opt-out of the study at any time and that their privacy would be protected by replacing their names with a letter in the research report, during conversations with colleagues about this study, and on all data collected, including student work, surveys, individual and focus group interviews. Participants that were on an IEP were told that they would not be asked to talk about its contents. In addition, to preserve and respect student participants’ time before and after school, in study halls, and for those that have IEP’s, in Learning Centers, all data collection, with the exception of the individual and focus group interviews, took place during our history class. The interviews took place either before or after school, during study halls, and with permission from Learning Center teachers, during Learning Center blocks. These interviews took approximately 15 minutes so students could return to their regularly scheduled activities. Finally, I shared with students that this research was meant to be an empowering experience for them because they had the opportunity to voice how specific activities inhibited or improved their understanding of the past, thus influencing the creation of future activities and assessments.

**Data collection: Procedures and instruments for data collection.** The study took place in January and February of the 2011-2012 school year during two contiguous units across six weeks. These two units, Unit 6: Asian Belief Systems and the Dynasties of China and Unit 7: The Middle Ages allowed for a variety of activities that required student use of historical evidence to make meaning of the past.
Since my research question asked students in my College Prep World History classes to explain the past through the use of historical evidence, the data I needed to answer this question required student written and verbal output regarding classroom activities. Classroom activities that elicited such feedback were in the form of written responses to historical questions, a group poster project, whole-class discussion, the creation of visual metaphors, interaction with visual resources, reading primary and secondary sources, and formative and summative assessments. In addition, I used the following types of data collection during the course of each unit: classroom activities where the researcher served as an observer of student interactions and conversation, person-to-person and focus group interviews where students had the opportunity to voice their experiences with the activities they participated in, surveys, and the use of written documents beyond tests that included writing samples. This information was used to determine how these various activities affected students understanding of the past as they used historical evidence. In summation, the data collection process is outlined in Table 1.
Table 1:

**Data Collection Process**

| Step 1: Introducing Students to Research Interest | A. Using a PowerPoint presentation, I explained the research study to College Prep students and how their participation or lack thereof would not affect their grades or our student teacher relationship.  
B. I informed students that an Informed Consent letter would be sent home both explaining the study and requesting participant participation and participant and guardian permission.  
C. I informed Learning Center teachers of the study and explained time needed for interviews.  
D. I sent letters home and awaited the return of the Informed Consent forms to establish the number of participants |
| --- | --- |
| Step 2: Preparing for Data Collection | A. I examined participants’ school schedules for free time during the school day to participate in individual and focus group interviews.  
B. I finalized the two contiguous units of study based on school schedule and the return of Informed Consent forms.  
C. I identified, modified, and created activities where students used historical evidence to understand the past and produced a product.  
D. Of these activities, I identified which student products would be collected and which activities students would complete a survey for or participate in individual and focus group interviews. |
| Step 3: Implementing Action Research and Collecting Data | The data collection process followed the steps below for each activity:  
A. Students received and interacted with a piece of historical evidence, with peers or independently, through a series of instructional steps that lead to a teacher defined understanding of the past.  
B. Students gave the teacher a product of that interaction (ex. visual metaphor, primary source organizer, written work). While students worked on their product, in a journal I recorded observations of student work habits (engaged, fatigued) and conversations around the process itself. I began to code these reflections along with student products and informal feedback, which informed the questions I asked during person-to-person interviews.  
C. Through individual interviews I asked students’ questions based on my field notes and the evaluation of student products. These interviews took place as soon as possible following each activity while student experiences were fresh in their mind. Individual interviews always took place before focus groups, as I did not want students influencing each other’s responses. |
D. From these individual interviews I created two focus groups of four and five students each. When forming these groups I took into consideration the relationships between students. Kruger & Casey (2009), suggested that students should be grouped with those they feel the most comfortable. The questions asked during these focus groups came from themes that emerged during the individual interviews.

E. The questions asked during both interview formats were written down for students to view and were also open-ended so as not to limit their answers and to provide students with the opportunity to explain their understanding. In addition, follow-up questions were also open-ended and I used the students’ words when doing so. In this way I avoided projecting my own opinions, ideas, etc. on the students to maintain their original meaning (Roulston, 2010).

F. Upon review of interview transcripts and assessment of products that students produced, I conducted member-checking. This was to ensure that my interpretation of student feedback was true to students’ intentions. It also gave students the opportunity to provide additional feedback.

The steps outlined in Table 1 helped me to conclude if it was the activity, product, and/or teacher instruction that helped or hindered student understanding of the past. In addition, to maintain consistency across student work, rubrics were used to assess student products in order to evaluate student understanding and their use of historical evidence. For example, if students were assigned the task of writing a response to an historical question based on a primary source, students were assessed on the degree to which they were able to critically analyze that source.

The model rubric in Table 2, by Stoskopf and Bermudez (received December, 2011), is an example of how student work was evaluated for such an activity. In addition to the model rubric shown in Table 2, Alan Stoskopf also gave me permission to use or adapt the following rubrics to assess student use of historical evidence: Number and variety of sources used to formulate an explanation; Relationship established between different historical sources, and Critical interrogation of historical sources and interpretation of their perspective and meaning in context (Stoskopf, Bermudez, and Hartman, received December, 2011) (see Appendix A).
Table 2

**Rubric: Evidence – Critical Interrogation of a Source**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th><strong>Paraphrasing</strong></th>
<th>Student paraphrases or summarizes the content, not mentioning author, audience, purpose, context. Implied assumption: what the sources say is true.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td><strong>Plausible Statements</strong></td>
<td>Student makes a plausible statement, but there is not justification for an interpretation. Mentions name of the author without elaboration on what it implies. Does not mention intended audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td><strong>Aware of Perspective/Bias</strong></td>
<td>Student notices perspective of a source, expression of caution. Considers this as a problem (the source is not very trustworthy). Mentions author and relates it to the perspective of the source, but in a stereotypical way. Does not consider audience or purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td><strong>Active Interpretation</strong></td>
<td>Student notices perspective of a source, explains it as a function of its author, intended audience and/or context. Uses perspectives as valuable information to formulate an explanation. Explicit about the inferences one is drawing/justification of inferences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td><strong>Reflective Interpretation</strong></td>
<td>Student reflects about the plausibility of his/her interpretation. Compares own interpretation with other possible interpretations, tries to argue for its value. Interpretations are open to further discussion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For data collected through observation or interview format, analytic memos and protocols were used. In terms of interview protocols I used Creswell’s (2007; 2009) model. All student interviews and discussions were audiotaped. They were also recorded in written form in case of technical problems. The protocol contained the following: space to record the date, interviewee’s name (which was not used in the final report), topic under discussion, instructions for me to follow to maintain consistency across student interviews and units, the list of initial and follow-up questions to record the interviewees answers, and a statement of appreciation for the interviewees participation and time. As previously explained, I asked open-ended questions so
as not to limit student responses. These questions were broad and then became more narrowed to elicit more specific information about the interview topic (Creswell, 2007; 2009). Since I worked with ninth grade students, I wanted them to be as comfortable as possible during the interview process. Therefore I also used focus groups in addition to person-to-person interviews. For the former, I acted as a monitor, providing prompts but allowing students to talk to each other in an effort to facilitate an organic conversation around the questions asked. As the moderator I made sure that no one student dominated the conversation, students did not interrupt each other, talked at the same time, or had side conversations (Roulston, 2010). Since I wanted the interviews to remain as natural as possible, when a student(s) deviated from the question asked, I returned back to the original question at the appropriate time.

For observational protocols, I used elements of Creswell’s (2007, 2009) model for recording information. I recorded the length and types of the activity in a journal with the paper divided into the following two headings: descriptive notes and reflective notes. The “descriptive notes” column contained my written observations of student dialogue regarding the use of historical evidence during a specific activity, regarding the activity itself, and the length of time it took students to complete the activity. I used the “reflective notes” column for my personal thoughts about the activity students were participating in, their engagement with the materials I had presented to them, and any student or personal ideas that arose during the specific activity. To elaborate on the notes taken in these columns, I kept analytic memos to record field notes during classroom observations and during the data analysis process, which allowed for reflection on the “coding process and code choices; how the process of inquiry was taking shape; and noting the emergent patterns, categories, and subcategories, themes, and concepts” (Roulston, p. 32, 2010) that surfaced from the data.
Finally, in terms of the reliability and validity of this research design, some of the activity formats and tests that were used during this study had also been used in previous years for either these specific units or others. While the factual component of the unit tests remained the same, the section in which students were asked to use higher-order thinking skills to answer an historical question varied based on the unit’s covered content and the activities used during the course of the unit. In addition, the activities that asked students to produce a product, such as a body paragraph or visual, was done in class so as to prevent receiving a product where students may have obtained help from Learning Center teachers, teacher assistants, parents, and/or tutors, from ultimately affecting my research results.

Data analysis: Procedures and models for data analysis. The procedures for data analysis followed a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2009) data analysis in a qualitative study involves analyzing data as it is being collected. With this in mind, I used analytic memos to record initial impressions and emerging themes from student interviews, discussions, and classroom observations and used the following procedures derived from elements of Creswell’s (2009) data analysis model and Yin’s (2016) five phases to analyze the data. In describing his five-phased analytic process, Yin (2016) uses the following terms: compiling, disassembling, reassembling (and arraying), interpreting, and concluding (pp. 185-187). These terms are used as headings in Table 3, which describes the data analysis process.
### Table 3

**Analyzing Qualitative Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: <strong>Compiling of Data</strong></th>
<th><strong>Phase 1: Compiling of Data</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I transcribed all interviews and discussions during and following data collection. This helped identify emergent themes across the data and ultimately allowed for the interpretation of student responses through the theoretical framework.</td>
<td>• I transcribed all interviews and discussions during and following data collection. This helped identify emergent themes across the data and ultimately allowed for the interpretation of student responses through the theoretical framework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I assessed student work and the use of historical evidence using rubrics.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I organized interview transcripts, student work, and researcher memos by activity so themes could first be identified for each activity before cross-referencing with other activities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 2: <strong>Disassembling</strong></th>
<th><strong>Phase 2: Disassembling</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The coding process itself was involved and began during the data collection process.</td>
<td>• The coding process itself was involved and began during the data collection process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) I used a data-driven model where I read data multiple times to identify key words, themes, or ideas from student responses. In reading the data I considered questions such as, “What general ideas are participants saying?” (Creswell, p. 185, 2009), “What is the impression of the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information?” (Creswell, p. 185, 2009); “How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on?”; “What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes?” (Saldaña, p. 18, 2009), “What issues, problems, and concerns are being raised?” (Corbin &amp; Strauss, p. 72, 2008).</td>
<td>a) I used a data-driven model where I read data multiple times to identify key words, themes, or ideas from student responses. In reading the data I considered questions such as, “What general ideas are participants saying?” (Creswell, p. 185, 2009), “What is the impression of the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information?” (Creswell, p. 185, 2009); “How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on?”; “What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes?” (Saldaña, p. 18, 2009), “What issues, problems, and concerns are being raised?” (Corbin &amp; Strauss, p. 72, 2008).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) For initial coding I used MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, for which I uploaded interviews and researcher memos and color coded emergent themes.</td>
<td>b) For initial coding I used MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, for which I uploaded interviews and researcher memos and color coded emergent themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) <strong>Descriptive Coding</strong>, which summarizes the main topic/context of a particular excerpt from the data and <strong>In Vivo Coding</strong>, which uses student words directly, was used during the coding of interviews and classroom observations (Saldaña, 2009).</td>
<td>c) <strong>Descriptive Coding</strong>, which summarizes the main topic/context of a particular excerpt from the data and <strong>In Vivo Coding</strong>, which uses student words directly, was used during the coding of interviews and classroom observations (Saldaña, 2009).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) In addition, my <strong>analytic memos</strong> were also coded as reflective data (Saldaña, 2009).</td>
<td>d) In addition, my <strong>analytic memos</strong> were also coded as reflective data (Saldaña, 2009).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) To account for coding the data more than once, I created a three-column chart with the following headings <strong>“Raw Data; Preliminary Codes; Final Code”</strong> (Saldaña, p. 17, 2009). This helped keep track of initial ideas for codes as I transcribed interviews and my analytic memos, and reflected on classroom observations.</td>
<td>d) To account for coding the data more than once, I created a three-column chart with the following headings <strong>“Raw Data; Preliminary Codes; Final Code”</strong> (Saldaña, p. 17, 2009). This helped keep track of initial ideas for codes as I transcribed interviews and my analytic memos, and reflected on classroom observations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Phase 3: Reassembling

- During the data analysis process I not only looked at the emerging themes from student explanations but also at how these themes related to each other both within the activities of each unit and across units. For example, when I used two different activities that asked students to use primary sources to make meaning of the past, I looked for commonalities and differences in student explanations regarding their level of historical understanding through the use of evidence.

### Phase 4: Interpreting

- Throughout the data analysis process and the interpretation of data, I reviewed my findings and codes with a Special Education teacher. This *peer debriefing* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) helped to ensure the credibility of my interpretations, helped me to clearly articulate my findings, allowed me to answer questions regarding my interpretations, and allowed for reflection regarding the direction of my research.
- In addition to peer debriefing, I checked my coding schemes with students who participated in the interviews to make sure I captured their ideas correctly. These codes were phrased in language they understood without losing their intended meaning. This took place during scheduled meeting times.

### Phase 5: Concluding

- Finally, I examined how emergent themes and statements made by students confirmed, complemented, or complicated any aspects of developmental theory and the literature review on historical understanding and student learning.

The process outlined in Table 3 helped with the interpretation of data in order to answer my research question. It is important to note that these phases were fluid in that they were revisited several times during the data analysis process (Yin, 2016). I also considered any new questions that emerged from the data and how they connected to the literature I previously read regarding student understanding of the past. For reliability, I checked transcripts for accuracy and made sure the meaning of my codes remained consistent during the coding process. This was of particular importance given that the themes for which I looked for in my data were left up for me to interpret.
Finally, Table 4 contains a timeline that explains the sequence and duration of the various steps I used to complete this data collection and analysis.

Table 4

**Data Collection and Analysis Timeline**

| Data Collection | • Data collection took place over 6 weeks covering two contiguous units.  
|                 | • Since our school schedule followed a seven-day rotating cycle, classes met three to four times a week. Therefore data collection took place one to two times per week. In total, I had eight to ten opportunities for collecting data during the course of these six weeks. This was due to the length of time needed for students to complete formative and summative assessments in class.  
|                 | • In conducting formal interviews, students were interviewed soon after activity completion so that the experience was fresh in their minds. |
| Data Analysis   | • During the data collection process itself, I started the transcription process of audio recorded information as well as my own classroom observation notes. In addition, I used MAXQDA and charts to establish preliminary codes.  
|                 | • The final transcription and coding process, including member-checking and peer debriefing, took approximately one to two months to complete.  
|                 | • Data analysis took an additional one to two months. |

**Validity and Credibility**

I took a number of steps to ensure the validity and credibility of my research and data analysis. To help make the data findings more meaningful and to place the reader in the classroom setting in which the data collection took place, I used detailed descriptions of the research setting, the student population, the activities and assessments students engaged in, and provided samples of student assignments and rubrics used for assessment in the appendices. Providing a rich description of the environment helps the reader to understand any biases that may have emerged during the course of the study. Any teacher biases that existed most likely
emerged during the start of the school year as I came to know the students in my College Prep classes. Lincoln and Guba (1985), in discussing ways to increase the likelihood of reliable or credible findings, suggested prolonged engagement (p.301) in the environment in which the research occurs. Since the research took place in my own classroom, I had the opportunity to establish its culture, build a trusting relationship with my students, and get to know their personalities. The latter was important for being prepared for any intended and unintended answers that students gave in response to interview questions and that could potentially alter my data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The validity or trustworthiness of this study was accounted for through triangulation, member-checking, and peer debriefing. For triangulation multiple sources of data such as individual and focus group interviews, student work, surveys, and researcher memos were collected. By gathering feedback in a variety of ways regarding a specific activity, the data shed light on the degree to which student feedback was reliable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data collection sequence, described in Table 1, allowed for the practice of triangulation, which was important for the preliminary coding process. Because there were a number of different data sources, member-checking was employed. As suggested by Anderson, et al., (1994) “A study’s trustworthiness involves the demonstration that the researcher’s interpretations of the data are credible or ‘ring true’ to those who provided the data” (p. 27). For trustworthiness, I used member-checking whereby students were given transcripts of their interviews and focus group conversations to look for their own words in my transcriptions and interpretations. This process allowed students to correct any misinterpretations of specific or general conclusions or themes I had drawn and also gave them the opportunity to offer additional feedback. In addition, students also had the opportunity to review the coding schemes I used to make sure they themes I used
were accurate. In both cases, the students were on record as having confirmed that my interpretation of their feedback was correct. During this process, I acknowledged whether or not students shared the same perspectives or feelings regarding the specific themes that I had during the coding process. Finally, to establish credibility I used peer debriefing as described in Table 3, where one colleague from the Special Education department reviewed my data interpretations for clarity, accuracy, and focus.

Finally, the limitation of my proposed research design stemmed from the student sample itself due to the small number of research participants.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Using ninth grade students, 14 to 15 years of age, presented ethical challenges. I needed parental permission to interview students and to report findings. Likewise, the issue of confidentiality played a role because of their age and, for participants who had an IEP, the contents of that confidential legal document needed to remain as such. Therefore, student names were replaced with a letter to protect student identity. I also was careful to avoid describing students in ways that could reveal their identity even with this letter system. In addition to protecting student identity, I was also sensitive to the fact that students in my College Prep classes already felt somewhat self-conscious about their placement in this class level. Therefore, I did not want to reinforce these feelings within my own classroom.

In order to ensure that I followed proper protocols in concealing student identity, I submitted my research plan for approval to the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B). In addition, I also created an informed consent form (Creswell, 2009) (see Appendix B), which provided details about my research project and the efforts I took to protect student identity. This
form also allowed students to withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable. This form required student and parent/guardian signatures before the study began.

**Conclusion**

During the past twenty years, educational reform efforts have placed other school subjects at the forefront of what students need to know to compete globally. While history education has more often than not been given a backseat to these subjects, historians argue that the skills developed during the study of the past provide students with higher-order thinking skills and a knowledge of the past that will inform the political, economic, and social decisions they make in the future. This, coupled with the need to provide all students with an equitable education, provided the foundation for my problem of practice. While Vygotsky’s developmental theory, underscored by Piaget and Bruner, provided a framework to examine the learning process of students in my College Prep World History classes, the literature regarding the relevance of History education did not couple these ideas specifically to students who needed more content and skill support. Through this qualitative action research design, I had the opportunity to look at the historical concept of evidence and how students in one College Prep class interacted with it. Through the use of various activities during two contiguous units on Asian belief systems and the dynasties of China and the Middle Ages, students engaged in using different types of historical evidence to make meaning of the past. Following these activities students explained, through a variety of data collection methods, how these activities helped or hindered their understanding. This opportunity not only gave my students a voice in how they used historical evidence to understand the past; but also informed my teaching practices. A description of the participants in context and the key activities they engaged in, along with the research findings derived from this data collection is presented in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

Introduction

After a review of the literature, the data collected was centered on answering the following research question:

*How do ninth grade students who have been placed in a College Prep World History class explain how they understand the past through the use of historical evidence?*

The collection of data took place in a ninth grade regular education College Prep World History classroom in a public school district west of Boston, Massachusetts. A total of nine students, eight girls and one boy participated in this six-week research study. Based on the research question, the data was collected across two contiguous units in a World History curriculum, Unit 6: *Asian Belief Systems and the Dynasties of China* and Unit 7: *The Middle Ages*. From eight activities in these two units, the data collected were from student interviews, student questionnaires, student work, and researcher memos. As a result of the collection and analysis of this data, the following four findings emerged:

- Teacher instructional language, scaffolding, and modeling strongly influenced students’ ability to use historical evidence to explain their understanding of the past.
- The format of activities strongly influenced student use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. (This included group work and MKO\(^1\), as well as visual and written data produced by students).
- Student ability to comprehend and work with varied and multiple sources greatly influenced their use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. (This included primary and secondary sources readings, visuals, and the integration of sources).

\(^1\) MKO refers to the *More Knowledgeable Other*, an important aspect of Lev Vygotsky’s Developmental Theory where others influence student growth and knowledge.
- Student skills in using historical evidence to support an argument to answer an historical question were limited. (This included higher-order thinking skills).

**Participants in context.** As previously mentioned, this study took place in a ninth grade regular education College Prep World History classroom. The College Prep classes were designed for students who needed more content and skill support, including but not limited to reading, writing, and higher-order thinking, than they would receive in other classes. Therefore, the number of students in each class was no more than 16 and often there was a teacher’s aid to assist with this support. With this support, students in the ninth grade College Prep World History class had the same curriculum as the other leveled ninth grade history classes. Having taught the College Prep class along with the other two levels of ninth grade history, it was my goal, when possible and often with scaffolded instruction, to provide students with the same historical resources as those students in the other history courses.

The benefits of having smaller classes were two-fold. Since the student-to-teacher ratio is smaller, it allowed me to provide students with more one-on-one time, giving me the opportunity to know my students both academically and personally, which in turn, gave them the opportunity to know more about me. With this in mind, since this study took place during the months of January and February, the students and I had developed a trusting and respectful relationship, and before the second bell cued the end of passing time and the start of class, it was the norm for us to talk about what was going on in their daily lives and New England sports. Our classroom environment, while focused on the study of the past, was a comfortable classroom setting where students could feel free to ask questions, learn from mistakes, and be themselves, important elements to the College Prep course where, in my experience students can have trust issues and are particularly nervous about being at the high school. As a result, I believe the
established classroom environment and the relationships built in the first half of the school year contributed to their helpful and honest participation in this study. To that end, what follows are some details about each of the student participants. It is important to note that although there were 9 participants, Student D did not participate freely. Since I value student voice, I omitted the participant’s data from this research study and therefore Student D is not included in the descriptions below.

**Student A.** She was very quiet in whole class settings but had a lot of friends in the class, which helped her come out of her shell when working in groups. Despite her shyness she would feel comfortable asking me questions and seemed to feel comfortable during the individual interview, offering critical feedback about the *Buy My Dynasty* project.

**Student B.** She was naturally shy, both in whole class and group settings. An incredibly hard worker, she would not hesitate to ask questions and come for extra help. She was also a very reflective learner. Even during the individual interview in reference to the interview question sheet that was provided she asked, “Can we do the prompts? I feel like it helps.” In addition, when answering a question pertaining to group work in Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty* (see Appendix C), she was reflective about having to present in front of a class: “It’s just, I don’t know I just get freaked out standing up in front of everyone and staring at me. I guess if I do it more I’d get better at it but usually my adrenaline starts going so I get really scared and also I (pause) forget everything and that just makes me more nervous.”

**Student C.** She liked to laugh a lot and share what was going on in her social life. Although she could be shy in the whole classroom setting, in groups she was very talkative. She was somewhat nervous during our individual interview and laughed quite often during her responses. At times it sounded like nervous laughter, other times genuine amusement about her
experience. The latter seemed to be the case when she said, “We were an all girl group and were all like friends kind of, I don’t know, we were just off task sometimes to be honest.”

**Student E.** She had a really dry sense of humor and loved to talk about her favorite male singer. She did not always participate in whole class settings but was comfortable in group settings and talking with me. She freely talked about how she felt on a number of given topics and was not afraid to ask questions about what I was asking during the interviews. During the individual interview she was extremely thoughtful, and looked through the *Buy My Dynasty* assignment packet I provided as a reference to answer questions. She also chuckled at times, once about the fact that the “internet was down”, a common occurrence at the time, and again as she shook her head before she verbally responded to the question: “If I didn’t put the key considerations there and just gave you the question, how would you feel about that?” She was extremely interactive with her group members during this activity. More so than I had seen her in the past.

**Student F.** She was also shy in the whole class setting. Although she was not very comfortable participating in front of the class, when one-on-one with peers, particularly her friends and with me, she was a lot more comfortable talking about historical content and any other topic of interest to her. She seemed to freely give critical feedback during the individual interview. She also had a good sense of humor about the struggles her group had creating the *Buy My Dynasty* slogan as she began laughing when she said, “Our product message, our slogan it wasn’t really that great.”

**Student G.** She was very talkative, funny, and often gave me updates on her personal life. She was the only student who immediately approached me after my PowerPoint presentation on my research study and told me she was going to participate. She participated
often in front of the class and during group work and talked freely during the interview, giving thoughtful answers. She was self-reflective about who she was as a person, as was demonstrated by her comments that she’s, “always had a strong personality.” She was also reflective about who she was as a learner as shown in her response about whether or not she would ask her group members first if she had a question, “I feel like we’re a team you can’t just go ahead and jump. . . . What if we’re like in the army in the middle of nowhere (laughter) we would need to work together.” She also laughed when talking about the use of and her discomfort with technology.

**Student II.** She was not very comfortable participating in front of the class but very talkative during the focus group interview. Overall she was talkative one-on-one and with her best friend Student E. Although she sometimes needed prompting during the individual interview, she gave thoughtful, critical feedback.

**Student I.** At times she was shy amongst her peers and when paired in groups but participated regularly in class. She was always ready to help with classroom tasks such as handing out or collecting papers. She seemed to freely give critical feedback during the individual interviews. Due to several factors, she was unable to participate in the focus group interview.

**Key Activities**

Table 5 describes the eight activities students participated in and that generated data during this research study. It also includes an overview of each activity’s purpose and the aspect of historical evidence assessed. This table is included to provide a general understanding of these activities, although more detail will be provided as they are discussed within each finding. It is important to note, due to the size of this research study, the participant population, and the protection of their time, along with curriculum time restraints, it was not possible to administer
student interviews and questionnaires after each activity. When they were conducted, they are listed in the last column of the table.
### Table 5

**Units 6 and 7 Activity Descriptions and Derived Data Points**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Introduction</th>
<th>Activity purpose</th>
<th>Concept of Evidence Assessed</th>
<th>Derived Data Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity 1: Visual Metaphor – Belief Systems of Asia</strong></td>
<td>• Students created a visual metaphor and explained in a written summary how their metaphor and the historical evidence they used answered an historical question about Confucius.</td>
<td>• To assess student ability to demonstrate causation by using historical evidence and representing it through a visual metaphor.</td>
<td>• Student ability to use multiple sources to answer an historical question in depth and represent it in a visual metaphor. • Student work. • Student questionnaire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity 2: China’s Dilemma</strong></td>
<td>• In groups, students assumed the role of “scholar” of their assigned Asian belief system to help the last Han emperor of China solve the growing problems of the dynasty. Students ultimately evaluated the solutions presented by the various groups and assessed which solution would be best for the emperor to follow.</td>
<td>• To assess if students could accurately use historical evidence to make an argument, defend it, and rationalize their position in a body paragraph based on the historical evidence they used and heard from other groups.</td>
<td>• Student understanding of an historical concept and ability to make an historical argument based on various sources. • Student work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty Wiki Pages*  
(Became a poster project due to technology issues). | • In groups, students worked together to teach their peers about a specific Chinese dynasty by answering an historical question. In doing so, students were to “sell” their assigned Chinese dynasty to their “customers”.  
• To teach their peers about a specific dynasty in China by answering an historical question.  
• To use technology to represent historical evidence.  
• To work with peers to answer an historical question and address key considerations through the use of historical evidence.  
• Student ability to integrate sources to understand an historical concept and answer an historical question. | • Student work.  
• Individual and focus group interviews. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Activity 4: *The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps* | • With a partner, students applied their previously learned reading strategies to a reading on the Battle of the Talas River. Students then used evidence from the reading to explain the various phases of the Tang Dynasty depicted in maps to answer an historical question.  
• To assess if students could use historical evidence from a secondary source to draw conclusions about different phases of a Tang Dynasty map.  
• Students work with a partner.  
• To assess student implementation of reading strategies when working with various sources to answer an historical question.  
• Student understanding of the historical concept based on evidence from various sources.  
• Student use of historical evidence from a secondary source to explain changes that are taking place on a map.  
• Student use of evidence from a text to interpret a visual. | • Student work.  
• Student questionnaire.  
• Focus group interview question. |
### Activity 5: *Buy My Dynasty Body Paragraph*

- As a follow up to Activity 3, students answered an historical question on their unit test about one of the dynasties they learned about.
- To work on writing skills: topic sentences, evidence, analysis, and transitions when writing a body paragraph.
- To work on writing skills: evaluating the strongest evidence to make the strongest argument.
- To assess if students could make an historical argument from memory.
- Student use of evidence to make an argument based on their historical knowledge.
- Student work.

### Unit 7: *The Middle Ages*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Introduction</th>
<th>Activity Purpose</th>
<th>Concept of Evidence Assessed</th>
<th>Derived Data Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Activity 6: Charlemagne Primary Source Organizer and Body Paragraph** | • With a partner, students used their previously taught reading strategies as they read two primary sources about Charlemagne. Students then filled out two primary source organizers and answered an historical question based on these two documents. | • To assess if students could use primary sources to answer an historical question.  
• To assess if students could assess the validity of a source to answer an historical question. | • Student ability to make an argument based on their evaluation of primary sources.  
• Student ability to draw relationships between different primary sources.  
• Student ability to critically interrogate and interpret perspective and historical context of historical sources. | • Student work. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students used their previously taught reading strategies as they read a secondary source on the Feudal System to write an answer to an historical question. Given the template provided, students created a visual metaphor that depicts their answer to the question.</td>
<td>• Students used an image of the Manor System to answer an historical question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To assess if students could create a visual metaphor that represented the different characteristics of the Feudal System, based on a reading.</td>
<td>• To assess if students could answer an historical question based on a visual of the Manorial system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To assess if creating a visual helped students understand the characteristics of the Feudal System.</td>
<td>• Student ability to use a visual to identify historical evidence to answer an historical question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student ability to use a source to answer an historical question through a visual metaphor.</td>
<td>• Student work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student ability to use a source to answer an historical question through a written summary.</td>
<td>• Student work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student ability to identify accurate historical evidence to answer a question.</td>
<td>• Student questionnaire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student work.</td>
<td>• Student questionnaire.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note on theoretical analysis of coding

The overarching themes that emerged during the coding process were a result of the analytic process driven by both theoretical codes developed from the theoretical framework and literature review, along with the new codes that were generated during data analysis. More specifically, the perspectives of Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians with aspects of Piagetian and Brunerian ideas on student cognitive development, along with a review of the literature on student understanding of the past and the use of student voice, helped to identify the overarching themes that emerged from the data.

For the theoretical framework and literature review analysis phase of the coding process, the list below describes the initial codes that emerged from developmental theory and the literature review. These codes are briefly referenced in the discussion of each finding and to differentiate between the new codes that emerged during the data analysis process.

**Developmental Theory**

- Vygotsky suggested that the use of mnemonic devices, prompts, peer and teacher discussion, and collaboration are effective learning tools that help students acquire knowledge (Karpov & Bransford, 1995).
- Neo-Vygotskians suggested embedding skills and content through the use of problem solving activities and collaboration to aid student learning (Trent, et al., 1998).
- Piaget suggested that students may have a hard time accepting ideas that differ from their own and that scaffolding should be used to aid student learning of new information (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2008).
- Neo-Piagetians believed that teachers needed to be aware of the skills student use when given a task (Case, 1993; Morra, et al., 2008).
• Bruner (1977, 1996) believed in the importance of giving students at any age challenging tasks and allowing them the opportunity to consider multiple perspectives in terms of their own.

• Vygotsky, neo-Vygotskians, Bruner, and Piaget, suggested that one’s culture could influence cognitive development (Bruner, 1977; 1986; Haenen, et al., 2003; Karpov & Bransford, 1995; Miller, 2002).

Literature Review

• Teachers need to understand student thinking about events, people, and other key elements to address previous perceptions and biases (Greene, 1994; Stearns, et al., 2000; Wineburg & Fournier, 1994).

• Teacher held expectations about student skill level when reading from texts and other sources, taking notes, and distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information may be inaccurate. (Mastropieri, et al., 2003)

• Use as instructional strategies the identification of main ideas from various sources and use mnemonic devices to remember information. (De La Paz & MacArthur, 2003)

• Instructional strategies, such as journal writing, concurrent strategies, and group work benefitted students understanding of the past.

• As solutions to reading challenges use reading question prompts, scaffolding and teacher modeling. (De La Paz, et al., 2007)

Student role in assisting analysis of data

Given the action research nature of this study, student contributions extended beyond the excerpts provided in the narratives that follows each research finding. Throughout the research process of this study, I continuously expressed to students that their involvement would not only
help my teaching practices, but also benefit my future students and educational practice in general. It could also help them learn more about their own learning styles through their articulation of activities and practices that aided as well as impeded their learning of the past. The action research design of this study allowed students to have a conversation about how they learn within the context of our World History curriculum and in the intimate setting of our history classroom. This in turn, gave participants the opportunity to provide feedback specific to the use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past, relative to their own learning styles and abilities. Due to the age of the student participants, it was not surprising that some appeared nervous during interviews, especially at the start of each session. As they progressed however, many of them appeared more comfortable and noticeably enjoyed talking about their learning experiences. Their reflection, willingness to participate, and in some cases expressions of enthusiasm, at times had a sense of stake-holder-quality to it, adding a dimension to the data analysis process as I considered what this opportunity meant to my students.

This student stake-holder-quality emerged during other occasions as well. During consecutive scheduled interview sessions, students mingled in the hallway as they waited their turn. Upon joining them, there was a sense of excitement as we generally discussed the interview process. Occasionally during history class, participants would reference their involvement in the study in front of their classmates. As such, there appeared to be a subtle sense of pride in being a part of something that valued their opinion. As expressed earlier, these moments, accompanied by transcribed student feedback, added a complexity to the data analysis process and the development of the four research findings.

Finally, students were active in the data analysis process. Although this thinking can be seen in some of the reflective memos provided in the narrative for each finding, immediate
responses by students as they interacted with unit materials impacted the structuring of how I chose to evaluate student work and future activities. The former resulted in using rubrics by Stoskopf & Bermudez (received December, 2011) and Stoskopf, et al. (received December, 2011) described in Chapter 3, or the drafting of new rubrics based on theirs, until I was satisfied with one that truly captured the aspect of evidence I wanted to assess. The latter made me reconsider future activities that I had planned for data collection. For example, originally Activity 1 on the belief systems of Asia was the only visual metaphor activity planned. After students expressed difficulty during and after this activity, I decided to make Activity 7 on the Medieval social classes in the Feudal System a simplified version of a visual metaphor in order to have comparative data to analyze. As mentioned earlier, student involvement in this research study extended beyond the selections used in the narratives because they were an active part of the analysis process and ultimately the crafting of the researching findings.

**Structure**

The rest of this chapter is organized to explain the findings. Each finding begins with a description of a significant discovery that was gleaned from the data sources, along with the subthemes that emerged during the coding process. It is within the narrative of these subthemes that data will be presented and its analysis discussed in terms of how it supports both the subtheme and the finding itself. In doing so, a brief reference to the theoretical codes used during the data analysis process is included. Finally, each finding will conclude with an explanation of the data and the relevance of the data sources and subthemes as they pertain to the research question.
Finding 1: Teacher instructional language, scaffolding, and modeling strongly influenced students’ ability to use historical evidence to explain their understanding of the past.

This finding represents important insights revealed by the data collected from Activities 1, 3, 4 and 6. From the research on Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, and the literature review, the codes that initially emerged showed that mnemonic devices, prompts, scaffolding, and teacher modeling are effective learning tools and that prior knowledge can influence student understanding of the past. While much of the data from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and student questionnaire responses reinforced these initial codes, after continued data analysis, new codes emerged and reflected topics that were not discussed during my research of the theoretical framework or literature on historical understanding. These codes will be evident in the narrative.

From the coding process, which spanned from initial coding to the development of overarching themes, two subthemes emerged, and therefore the narrative for Finding 1 discusses the data within this context. The first of these subthemes is *helped*, where student feedback demonstrated that areas of helpful instruction were those that were emphasized and scaffolded, whereas data supporting the second subtheme, *hindered*, revealed instructions that lacked clarity and historical context and therefore impeded student understanding. The following is a more thorough description of how the data supports each of these subthemes and the finding itself.

**Helped.** During Activities 1, 3, 4, and 6, the students used historical evidence to understand the past by interacting with different historical sources and demonstrating their knowledge in a variety of ways. As a result, the data from student participants indicated that the use of certain instructional language, presentation, and modeling helped students’ in their ability to use historical evidence to explain their understanding of the past. For Activity 1: *Visual Metaphor – Belief Systems of Asia* students, using the note-taking strategies they learned at the
beginning of the school year, read, marked-up, and annotated the primary and secondary sources they were given about Confucianism and created a visual metaphor to answer the following historical question: *According to the beliefs of Confucius, how could social order and good government be restored in China during the Zhou dynasty?* Per the instructions, students worked independently, followed the provided steps, and used the sample metaphors as a guide to complete the activity. Following the completion of the metaphor, they wrote a summary of how the historical evidence used in their metaphor answered the question. Curious about student understanding of the question on Confucius, I asked them a survey question about it. In response, Student A (personal communication, January 12, 2012) stated, “The question that was going to be answered was very clear and was easy to find in the text.” Similarly, data analysis of Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty* also provided insights into how students found clarity in instructional wording helpful in understanding their assignment. Activity 3 grouped students together to create an ad campaign to sell their assigned dynasty to their “customer”, which was the rest of the class and myself. In doing so, each group was assigned a dynasty and had to answer the related unit question. For example, the question for the Tang dynasty group was, *How did China sustain their political and cultural expansion during the Tang Dynasty?* Because these questions were broad, I also provided them with “key considerations” or key aspects of their dynasty’s history to help them answer the question. In doing so, each group member was given a reading packet about their specific dynasty to aid them in their research and more specifically the “key considerations” in an effort to help them answer their question. As a final product, students created an advertisement in the form of a poster (we had to switch from a wiki page due to technology issues) that included a “product message” and “slogan”, along with information about their dynasty that addressed the “key considerations” and answered their unit
question. In addition to creating their advertisement, each group had to create a worksheet for their classmates to complete as they viewed the poster. The assignment provided a number of steps for students to follow, and the data from student individual interviews presented in Figure 1 reflected on the helpfulness of these steps and my instruction as a whole.

Figure 1. Student Feedback on the Helpfulness of Instruction for Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty*

“I think it wasn’t really too hard to understand because I mean it has all the different steps on what you had to do. So nothing was really confusing it was straight forward on what we had to do”. (Student A, personal communication, February 1, 2012)

“I wouldn’t know what to search up if we didn’t have them [key considerations]. It’s like a guideline for us that this is what we need to search and that we can do that. We can’t really find that by ourselves because we don’t really know what to search up if you just gave us the question.” (Student E, personal communication, February 3, 2012)

“Well, everything in bold really helped because of the *tips* and *important* that helped me understand everything.” (Student C, personal communication, February 2, 2012)

“Yeah the procedure, we read it like maybe twice and I think it really helped us because you did remind us about the tone, like we have to sell it not just like tell you facts and throw all that at you. We had to make it sound good and convincing for you to buy it. So, that was really helpful and I did learn about all they key considerations.” (Student E, personal communication, February 3, 2012)

The data in the visual demonstrates that the italicizing and bolding of terms, using instructional phrasing that includes words like “tips”, and providing an outline for research aided students in understanding the dynasty they were studying and how to complete the project. This also supports the idea that instructional scaffolding can help students in my College Prep classes with the learning process.

Finally, data from Activity 4: *The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps* showed the usefulness of visual aids such as maps as an effective tool for helping students acquire
knowledge. For this activity students in pairs read, marked-up, and annotated, a reading on the battle of the Talas River. While they read, students’ were also instructed to underline evidence from the reading that answered the question, *How can the territorial changes of the Tang Dynasty be explained?* In addition to the reading, to help them answer the question, I provided them with a variety of maps that showed different periods of the Tang Dynasty’s expansion. Interested in the usefulness of these maps, during the focus group interviews I asked students about their experiences working with them. During Focus Group 2’s interview there was consensus among Students B, E, F, and H (Student I was unable to participate) that the maps were helpful in understanding the readings provided. Student H (personal communication, February 9, 2012) reported for example, “I think they helped because it showed what was being taken over and how it declined after and what years it happened and everything.” While their focus group interview provided insights as to how visuals, such as maps, can aid in the understanding of the past, Focus Group 1 communicated a very different experience. This, along with other difficulties that students experienced is discussed in the next subtheme. **Hindered.** While student data in the previous subtheme showed that instructional language, presentation, and scaffolding helped students’ ability to use historical evidence to explain their understanding of the past, much of the data also indicated areas in which their understanding was hindered. For Activity 1: *Visual Metaphor – Belief Systems of Asia*, Student I (personal communication, January 12, 2012) stated on her student questionnaire, “There was a little confusion for me with the summary. It seemed a little unclear as to how much to include or what I should include.” Student B (personal communication, January 9, 2012), on her student questionnaire reported the following in reference to the visual metaphor: “I had trouble getting started because it was hard to think of what could represent each thing. The language was pretty
easy to understand but didn’t help me very much.” As with Activity 1, similar observations regarding the need for teacher modeling were made during Activity 6: *Charlemagne Primary Source Organize and Body Paragraph* (see Appendix D). During this activity, students worked with a partner to read, mark-up, and annotate two primary source accounts about Charlemagne. As they read, students filled in a chart that asked them to identify the author’s description of events, evidence of author bias, and questions they had about the document, using information from their readings. Once their chart was completed, students needed to answer the question, *Did Charlemagne deserve to be given the title “Charlemagne the Great”?* Figure 2 shows my observations as later recorded in teacher memos.

Figure 2. Teacher Memos on Student Interaction with a Primary Source Organizer During Activity 6: *Charlemagne Primary Source Organize and Body Paragraph*

“As kids began filling out the chart I got several questions about what ‘bias’ meant – a word that we have repeatedly used throughout the year.” (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, February 9, 2012)

“Students are also having a hard time distinguishing between the first and second column. They didn’t understand that for the first column they have to write a description of what Einhardt is describing. I think the word “event” in the first column is throwing them off a bit.” (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, February 9, 2012)

As evidenced by the memos, a more thorough review and explanation about key terms and the primary source organizer may have helped students present their understanding of the past to the best of their ability.

In addition, a common theme that emerged, particularly during Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty*, was that the phrasing of unit questions, vocabulary words, and the historical context of readings limited student understanding of the dynasty they were assigned. As Student C (personal communication, February 9, 2012) reported during the focus group interview:
I like straight out questions. It was mainly the wording I think and the way it was just said. I think maybe if it was worded: ‘Why did the Ming dynasty focus on recovering the past rather than looking at the future?’ instead of ‘pioneering’ because I had no idea what that meant.

Adding to her own sentiments on the need for clarity she continued:

Ok, for my dynasty, the question was, *Why did the Ming dynasty despite its growth, focus on recovering the past rather than pioneering the future?* From my reading, I had no idea what that meant. Because my research was on the Rise of Beijing and the Forbidden City, which had nothing to do with them looking at the past. (Student C, personal communication, February 9, 2012)

These excerpts provided insights as to how phrasing was an impediment for some of my students, which can complicate their understanding and presentation of their historical knowledge.

The data did show however, that repetition of historical content, especially when given these types of tasks, could help some students. The focus group interviews added richness to this data because they allowed for follow-up questions regarding common themes that emerged during Activity 3’s individual interview sessions. As was suggested by Student C (personal communication, February 9, 2012), “And then I feel like the Tang Dynasty [was] like the main thing in this unit, and the Ming dynasty was more strange and not talked about.” This student, along with Focus Group 1 members A and G, went on to indicate that they had a better understanding of the Tang dynasty because it was more of a focal point of our unit. This group in particular appeared relaxed talking amongst their peers and more willing to offer constructive
criticism. Student C for example, during the individual interview, did not discuss the wording of the question but was forthcoming during the focus group interview.

Another area of instruction that hindered student understanding of the past occurred during Activity 4: *The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps*. While the student questionnaire responses were helpful in gaining feedback about student experiences with this activity, it was the focus group interviews that illuminated the contrasting student experiences with these maps. As previously discussed under the helped subtheme, Students B, E, F, and H from Focus Group 2 reported the maps to be helpful in understanding the readings provided on the Tang Dynasty. Students A, C, and G from Focus Group 1, however, found the maps confusing. Student C (personal communication, February 9, 2012) reported, “I didn’t really understand what the maps were really showing” and Student G (personal communication, February 9, 2012) added, pointing to the maps, “they were focusing on this and then it went to that and I didn’t know what these lines were for and I was like wait a minute.” While students in each focus group may have tried to agree with their peers, the feedback regarding their understanding of the maps and how they helped or hindered their historical knowledge were still informative. It is important to note however, that as a whole, Focus Group 2 seemed less comfortable talking in front of their peers. Student E, for example, was less talkative compared to her individual interview. Nonetheless, student data suggest that teacher instruction on how to read maps might have aided student understanding of this historical event.

Finally, the data also suggested an element of stress that emerged not only due to the type of task that was assigned but the scope of instruction as well, resulting in new codes. In describing her experience with Activity 3 during her individual interview, Student G (personal communication, February 2, 2012) stated:
There weren’t specific words or phrases it’s just for me personally I always need to reread the directions a couple times because it takes me longer to understand them. And then like whenever I look at directions I just see – oh my goodness there’s a bunch of directions I need to follow – but I’m starting to learn that I just need to take everything piece by piece and then just check them off, so I think that was good.

Student B (personal communication, February 1, 2012) echoed these sentiments with, “usually when I start projects like this I get a little bit nervous . . . I don’t really understand it at first but then after a while, like when we’ve been doing the project I understand it better.” Therefore, as suggested by both Students B and G, when presenting students with detailed, lengthy, and scaffolded instruction, I need to reflect on how I can help reduce feelings of anxiety regarding a given task.

**Summation of Finding 1**

The individual and focus group interviews, student questionnaire responses, and researcher memos, provided insights into how instructional language, modeling, and scaffolding strongly influenced student understanding of the past during Activities 1, 3, 4, and 6. The review and analysis of the data, while reinforcing some of the initial codes created from the theoretical framework and literature review, provided for the emergence of new codes, shedding light on new challenges for students. As a result, within Finding 1, two subthemes emerged, *helped* and *hindered*, each one articulating student levels of clarity and confusion during their work across these activities and how teacher instruction can impede or facilitate their access to historical evidence and ultimately their understanding of the past.
Finding 2: The format of activities strongly influenced student use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. (This includes group work and MKO, as well as visual and written data given to and produced by students).

Finding 2 represents another important insight that emerged from the individual and focus group interviews, student questionnaires, and researcher memos, collected during Activities 1, 3, 4, and 7. The following narrative discusses and analyzes the data from these sources and draws attention to the influence that activity formats had on student understanding of the past. The initial codes from the literature review emphasized embedding skills and content through the use of a number of different activities, the use of peer and teacher discussion and collaboration as learning tools, the use of prompts and scaffolding as solutions to reading challenges, and the belief that it is important to give students challenging tasks. Elements of surprise that emerged and that were not discussed in the review of the theoretical framework or literature review resulted in new codes, which will be evident during the discussion of this finding. As with Finding 1, the specific subthemes of helped and hindered emerged to describe student experiences with the format of activities and their influence on student use of historical evidence to understand the past. The following narrative within each subtheme describes the data and the analysis in further detail.

Helped. Instructions for Activities 1, 3, 4, and 7 required students to present their knowledge in a variety of ways while working both independently and with their peers. When asked about their experiences, students voiced both positive and negative learning experiences from activity formats. Describing the positive experiences, some students liked using the format of a visual metaphor to demonstrate their understanding of a topic. In response to a survey on Activity 1: Visual Metaphor – Belief Systems of Asia, where students created a visual metaphor to answer a question about Confucius, Student B (personal communication, January 12, 2012)
stated that she, “Found it easy to demonstrate my knowledge this way. It was easy to say that one thing was suppose to represent another and explain why.” Similarly, some students found it helpful to express their understanding of the Feudal System for Activity 7: Medieval Social Classes in the Feudal System: A Visual Metaphor. After initial feedback was mixed regarding Activity 1’s visual metaphor, I decided to try this format again for Activity 7, this time by reducing the amount of readings, to see if this made a difference for students. For this activity, students independently read, marked-up, and annotated a reading about the Feudalism structure and then used the provided outline of a person to create a metaphor that depicted the characteristics of the Feudal System. Curious about student experiences with the visual metaphor during this activity, I asked students to complete a questionnaire. In doing so, Student B stated (personal communication, February 14, 2012):

[T]he metaphor improved my understanding of the Feudal System. It had me think in a different way. I had to think how a part of the Feudal System could represent something else. I had to expand my thinking than just thinking about it logically.

Similarly, Student E (personal communication, February 14, 2012) wrote, “it took all of my key points out of my head and [put them] on paper.” As expressed by Students B and E, some of the positive student experiences with Activity 7’s visual metaphor suggested that certain tasks could be made easier or harder, depending on activity requirements.

Focus group interviews regarding the maps provided for Activity 4: The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps, when students used evidence from a reading to answer an historical question, also demonstrated how visuals aided student understanding of the past. As Student B (personal communication, January 31, 2012) stated, “You can see what’s happening. In the reading there’s all this detail and you can sort of see like overall, broader what’s
happening.” Student H (personal communication, January 31, 2012) added, “I also liked it because it shows the size difference so you don’t just picture it and people can be picturing different things so you can get different answers I guess.”

The students also had positive feedback regarding the student created worksheets used as a learning tool to teach peers about the dynasties of China for Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty*. Student A (personal communication, February 1, 2012) for example, reported during her individual interview that, “[A]ll the questions leading up to that big question they all sort of connected to the big question so it was easier to understand and be able to answer it and then I kind of new about each dynasty more.” The data regarding visuals and the worksheet showed how some students benefitted from these tools to learn about the past.

In addition to the data about worksheets aiding students, the data also revealed the benefits of students’ social interactions to help with their understanding of the past. This was particularly evident during the aforementioned Activity 3, where students worked in groups and divided up tasks and research in order to teach their classmates about their dynasty. The benefits of this collaboration were made evident through the individual and focus group interviews. Students expressed appreciation for hearing peer perspectives, the benefits of articulating personal knowledge verbally as a learning tool, the collaboration in finding new evidence about a topic, and the learning process of working together even when it was challenging. Student F in particular articulated this last point with the following response in regards to her experience working within a group: “I liked working in a group but I thought that sometimes it was hard to make sure everyone pulls their part but it also teaches you about pulling your own weight and how important it is to do your part” (Student F, personal communication, February 2, 2012).
Figure 3 highlights additional interview feedback about student experiences working in a group during Activity 3.

Figure 3. Student Feedback Regarding Group Work During Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty*

“Yeah, some of the people in my group were questioning stuff about the Examination System which I worked on and like, I got the information that they were asking and I found missing parts to it.” (Student E, personal communication, February 3, 2012)

“Yes, I always have like, even though I know the answer in my mind I like to double check with other people. So when I work in groups I like that and yeah they always made sure, I was reassured the directions.” (Student G, personal communication, February 2, 2012)

“Yeah, I sort of had to trust them. I didn’t really research what they had done so I had to trust them on what they had to research. It was sort of nice because usually other people have different thoughts than you do so it’s sort of nice to hear what they have to think about it.” (Student B, personal communication, February 2, 2012)

“I think just saying it out loud in general is just really helpful because like reading it and saying it to yourself in your head, you know what it is, but saying it out loud just makes you understand it a lot more.” (Student C, personal communication, February 2, 2012)

“In my group, since we all are doing different parts, I feel like we got a chance to teach each other about ours, so it was kind of a good experience to memorize. It’s kind of a studying thing too, you’re teaching another member about your section in your dynasty.” (Student G, personal communication, February 2, 2012)

“I got to experience kind of leading a little bit and that was fun. I was trying not to be too bossy, like I tried to help anybody that had a question and they helped me too when I needed help.” (Student G, personal communication, February 2, 2012)

Similar to their opinions about the benefits of group work, students also reported how helpful it was to be able to ask our classroom teacher assistant and me clarifying questions about activity requirements and historical content. In researching the Ming Dynasty during Activity 3 for example, Student A asked a question about the term *isolationism*. In asking her during the
individual interview, how this helped her she stated: “You told me that it was about isolation and so I had read about that and I kind of knew where it was” (Student A, personal communication, February 1, 2012). Adding to this sentiment, Student B (personal communication, February 1, 2012) reported during her individual interview:

Um, if I had a question I’d probably, I don’t know I was probably more likely to ask you [or the teacher’s assistant]. I don’t know, I have a hard time trusting people and I feel like somebody might tell me the wrong information or I’ll have done something and then I learn that I wasn’t suppose to do that, so I feel like it’s just easier to ask the teacher.

In addition to asking teachers for help, students found instructions that I provided to be helpful for Activity 3, as Student E (personal communication, February 3, 2012) stated:

I wouldn’t know what to search up if we didn’t have them [key considerations]. It’s like a guideline for us that this is what we need to search and that we can do that. We can’t really find that by ourselves because we don’t really know what to search up if you just gave us the question.

Finally, the data revealed the value in having students engage in challenging activities. Student B, quoted earlier in referencing the feudalism metaphor, was forced to think in a different way. Similarly, Student G (personal communication, February 2, 2012) mentioned using note-taking skills taught earlier in the year to approach readings during Activity 3:

Um, this activity was actually challenging but at the same time it was fun to do because well actually doing the marking-up it actually helped me get practice with it and um I kind of want to be a lawyer so trying to find evidence. And I want to build a business so trying to sell a dynasty was good practice.
The feedback students provided on how they approached difficult tasks, along with how activity formats helped their learning of the past was extremely helpful in informing future activities for my College Prep classes.

**Hindered.** While some of the data from Finding 2 showed that project format and student interactions aided in student understanding of the past, the data also revealed areas in which they hindered understanding. For example, the students’ task to create an advertisement for Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty* proved to be a challenging one. As Student F (personal communication, February 2, 2012) revealed during her individual interview, “Cause we didn’t really know how to advertise it in the right way. They [her group members] made up this random word.” When I revisited this topic again during the focus group interviews she added, “I think it’s hard to try to mix being creative and we’re so used to having to research things and getting all of the facts first instead of trying to have to be creative” (Student F, personal communication, February 9, 2012). Researcher memos also reflected on this difficulty; “Students are having different levels of difficulty moving from their notes to representing them with an advertisement tone. This is with having showed them examples when I first introduced the project and again yesterday” (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, January 24, 2012). Such student feedback, along with my own observations, demonstrated the need to find a more explicit way to model expectations or rethink the assignment requirements so that they do not interfere with students’ use of historical evidence to understand the past.

The data also provided an understanding about the use of student created worksheets and posters as a learning tool to teach peers about the dynasties of China. In terms of the worksheets, students G and I, along with a researcher memo, highlighted their degree of effectiveness. As
Student G (personal communication, February 2, 2012) stated in her interview response to whether or not the worksheets helped her understanding of the dynasties:

Yes and no. Some of the classmates asked questions on the worksheets that weren’t on the poster. I didn’t really know how to answer them so we left a lot of them blank. So, and like when you’re doing the study guide [for the unit test] you want to know some of the answers to the questions on the worksheet so it was kind of hard to do that when you didn’t know the answer.”

Student I (personal communication, February 3, 2012) also shared this sentiment when she stated that, “There were too many vague questions that didn’t really relate.” My researcher memo anticipated that this might be an issue for students:

Some students had trouble with forming questions for their worksheet. Some aren’t relative or repetitive. For example, Student F’s group asked how long their dynasty lasted but they have the dates on the top of the page and it’s not something that necessarily helps them answer the unit question. (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, January 27, 2012)

While the effectiveness of the worksheets varied, depending on the quality of the question, and speaks to the need for better teacher modeling on my part, some students in my College Prep World History classes may not be able to create steps, in the form of questions, to aid in the understanding of larger concepts if they, in turn, do not understand how evidence fits into a larger historical context. In addition to the worksheets, some students also found that the posters hindered their understanding of the dynasties of China. Student C’s feedback regarding this format suggested the need for better teacher modeling if I were to continue to use a poster format
for this or any other activity. In her response to an interview question about their helpfulness she stated:

Um, somewhat. Their questions were really hard to find on the poster because they like,
I remember one dynasty, three or four of the questions weren’t on the poster. And we were like really confused on where everything was because they didn’t write the headings.” (Student C, personal communication, February 2, 2012)

Interesting data that emerged during the analysis process were the negative sentiments expressed by students regarding working with peers, their interaction with visuals and the idea of working with technology. While the issue of students equally sharing their weight during group work is a common problem that might be solved through better strategic pairing, the data also showed that student pairing during reading activities can hinder student understanding of the past. During Activity 4: *The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps*, students were asked to answer an historical question after reading a source and examining maps about the expansion of the Tang Dynasty. Important insights were revealed about students’ experiences reading with a partner. Students G and I, answered on their questionnaires, responded to whether or not working with a partner helped them understand the reading. Student G (personal communication, January 31, 2012) reported, “No, because when I read to understand it I have to read it on my own.” Echoing similar sentiments, Student I (personal communication, January 31, 2012) wrote, “Working with partners did not help me understand the reading. It was too rushed. People were trying to highlight when other people were trying to move onto the next paragraph.” This feedback provided insight as to how group work can both benefit, as described in the *helped* section, and hinder students’ efforts to work with historical evidence and to understand the past.
In addition to working with peers, some students also found the visuals hindered their understanding of the past. In terms of creating visual metaphors for Activity 1: *Belief Systems of Asia – Visual Metaphor* and Activity 7: *Medieval Social Classes in the Feudal System: A Visual Metaphor*, Students C, H, and I, in their survey responses, expressed difficulty using this format. For example, Student C (personal communication, February 2, 2012) reported the following about Activity 1: “I kind of guessed where to put everything.” Student H (personal communication, January 12, 2012), in regards to Activity 7 wrote, “We were just basically rewriting everything which usually does not help me” and Student I (personal communication, February 14, 2012) reported that, “Filling in the metaphor did not improve my understanding. It actually confused me a little bit. I was not sure what to do.” Focus group interviews regarding the maps provided for Activity 4: *The Battle of the Talas River*, also revealed how visuals impeded student understanding. Student G (personal communication, February 9, 2012) reported, “I’m a visual learner so visuals usually help me. I think it was just that this reading had a lot of detail and I don’t think we really needed the visuals.”

An element of surprise that emerged out of the data was the feelings towards technology expressed by Students E, G, and H. Such sentiments emerged during individual interviews and therefore the focus group interviews provided the opportunity to enquire further about this topic. As I mentioned in the activity table at the start of this chapter, the format for Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty* was a Wiki page, but due to technology issues at the high school, it was switched to a poster project. Students’ E and H preferred the poster format to the wiki page. Student E (personal communication, February 3, 2012) stated “I like that we wrote it on paper. It made it clearer to lay out in front of us.” Student H (personal communication, February 3, 2012) reported:
I found it was easier to do the poster because you could lay everything out first and it will be easier to change everything. But on the wiki page you would probably have to pre-write everything and then possibly have to write it again because it could get deleted or something.

Student G emphasized her appreciation for doing the poster rather than the wiki page: “Oh no, I’m terrified of technology, I’m awful at technology I was afraid I was going to mess up, I was going to not lead on that one, I was going to let someone else (personal communication, February 2, 2012).” As a result, both the individual and focus group interviews provided rich insights as to the anxiety some students felt towards technology and how concrete tasks may alleviate that anxiety.

**Summation of Finding 2**

The individual and focus group interviews, student questionnaires, and researcher memos provided insights into how the format of activities strongly influenced student use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past during Activities 1, 3, 4, and 7. While many of the initial codes were supported by the data points, from the benefits and drawback of the use of visuals to the varied experiences of group work, data analysis of student feedback and researcher memos revealed new codes. As a result, and similar to Finding 1, the subthemes of *helped* and *hindered* emerged to describe student experiences with activities. Therefore, the data from the various data sources demonstrate the need to weigh the impact of activity formats as a learning tool on student interaction with historical evidence and their understanding of the past.
Finding 3: Student ability to comprehend and work with varied and multiple sources greatly influenced their use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. (These sources included primary and secondary source readings, visuals, and the integration of sources).

This finding represents an important discovery from the data sources during Activities 1, 3, 4, 7, and 8. The narrative contains excerpts from individual and focus group interviews, student questionnaire responses, and reflective memos that highlight how student interaction with multiple sources, visuals, challenging vocabulary, and in-text reading aids influenced student use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. The initial codes from the research on Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner, along with the literature review, emphasized how the use of mnemonic devices, prompts, peer and teacher discussion and collaboration are effective learning tools that help students acquire knowledge; that teachers expectations of student skill levels may be inaccurate; that the use of instructional strategies to help with reading can be beneficial, along with reading questions, prompts, and teacher modeling; and that students should be allowed to grapple with more difficult tasks.

While much of the data supported these codes, new codes emerged during the data analysis process and are discussed within the Finding. The subthemes Building Blocks and Roadblocks describe students’ experiences as they interacted with varied and multiple sources to understand the past. These are included in the narrative that follows.

**Building blocks.** Student ability to comprehend and work with varied and multiple sources influenced their use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. More specifically, some students’ experiences revealed how the sources they were given for Activities 4, 7, and 8 served as building blocks for their understanding. Activity 4: *The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps* is an example this. During the focus group interview about the usefulness of the maps that were included to understand the Tang dynasty’s expansion, Student
H (personal communication, February 9, 2012) reported, “I think they helped because it showed what was being taken over and how it declined after and what years it happened and everything.” Student B (personal communication, February 9, 2012) reported, “You can see what’s happening. In the reading there’s all this detail and you can sort of see like overall, broader what’s happening.”

In addition to Activity 4, feedback from student questionnaires regarding Activity 7: *Medieval Social Classes in the Feudal System: A Visual Metaphor*, where students had to read about the Feudal System and depict its classes on an outline of a person, showed in-text context clues and a visual aided student historical understanding. When asked on the student questionnaire, *From the reading alone, did you understand the characteristics of the Feudal System?* Student A (personal communication, February 14, 2012) responded, “Yes because the reading organized the different steps of the Feudal System. It was organized like a social pyramid which was then easy to transfer to the visual metaphor.” Students B and I shared similar sentiments. Student B (personal communication, February 14, 2012) stated, “The reading did a good job explaining the Feudal System. It was also something for me that was easier to understand. It wasn’t as complicated as some other things.” Student I (personal communication, February 14, 2012) wrote, “From the reading alone, I did understand the characteristics. It seemed very clear. The terms in ‘bold’ helped.” My researcher memo regarding Activity 7 supported these student experiences:

It’s worth noting that in the reading there was a social pyramid that I decided to keep as a part of the reading [rather than remove it] because I was concerned as to whether or not students would understand the reading without it. In answering student questions,
students were using that pyramid to think about their metaphor. (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, February 14, 2012)

The data regarding Activities 4 and 7 support the initial codes derived from the theoretical framework and literature review regarding the benefits of using prompts and other tools to aid student understanding of the past. Student feedback also suggested that students in College Prep World History classes can be given challenging readings and should be given the opportunity to grapple them. The challenge as a teacher is to find ways to provide students with the tools to successfully work with such sources.

Finally, Activity 8: Manor System Visual with Question, asked students to independently examine a detailed image of a feudal manor during the Middle Ages and then to use evidence from this image to answer an historical question. The data from a rubric used to assess whether students were able to use an historical source to answer an historical question through a written summary, showed that students were able to use the visual of a feudal manor to answer the question. The data demonstrated that visuals could be used as a learning tool to help students acquire knowledge.

The results from this activity, along with the results from Activity 4: Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps, demonstrates the importance for teachers to understand how visuals impact student learning.

Roadblocks. The building blocks discovered from the data from these activities also showed that they included roadblocks to learning during Activities 1, 3, 4, and 7. These roadblocks revealed themes that were not present in the theoretical framework and literature review. For example, challenging vocabulary impeded student use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. As was reported during their individual interviews on their
experiences regarding the difficulties they found with Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty*, Student A (personal communication, February 1, 2012) stated, “We were Ming and I had to do *heightened ethnocentrism* and it was kind of hard to find what that meant and find it in the reading.” Student C (personal communication, February 2, 2012) echoed these challenges with, “Um, at some points, when they put like words in I didn’t understand I found it difficult and then it was just like stuff I understood it was really easy.” In addition to vocabulary impeding student understanding, the students’ abilities to read their Tang dynasty map during Activity 4 also served as a roadblock. Student feedback during focus group interviews regarding this topic is highlighted in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Student Feedback Regarding their Understanding of Maps During Activity 4: *The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps*

> “I thought all of the maps were confusing only because there were so many of them and it was often hard to tell on one of them which was which dynasty. Overall I am still unsure about some of the details.” (Student E, personal communication, February 9, 2012)

> “I didn’t really understand what the maps were showing. Like it said in the beginning they started off small, then they expanded, then they stayed the same. So I thought they were going to stay the same here [pointing to the map] but they stayed the same from the beginning and that kind of confused me.” (Student G, personal communication, February 9, 2012)

> “I didn’t really use the maps. I just looked at them and was like, I don’t really know what that means.” (Student C, personal communication, February 9, 2012)

> “I think the visuals in general just confused me after I read something that gave me a ton of information. I think visuals just throw me off and I know for a fact I did this wrong on the test.” (Student C, personal communication, February 9, 2012)

The data revealed that student access to historical evidence and their understanding of the past can be limited if they do not now how to access information from sources. It also emphasized
the importance of knowing the skills the students in my College Prep classes use when tackling different tasks. This knowledge informed my teaching practices. For example, prior to giving challenging readings to students, I learned I needed to better model how to approach multiple sources.

Finally, both the number of readings that were provided during certain activities as well as the difficulty of those readings, challenged the students’ ability to use historical evidence to understand the past. First, the challenge of the number of readings was reflected in student comments on Activity 1: *Visual Metaphor - Belief Systems of Asia*, where students created a visual metaphor and wrote a summary regarding aspects of Confucianism and how they applied to the Zhou dynasty. Student I (personal communication, January 12, 2012), in her student questionnaire, responded to the question about whether she experienced any difficulties during the activity, with the following: “it was hard to go through all the reading and pick out the most important facts.” Likewise, Student E (personal communication, February 3, 2012) shared a similar experience during her individual interview regarding Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty* when she stated, “I think the research, like we had a lot of resources and I’m not sure if we could fit all that stuff into the specific things we’re supposed to do.” Similarly, a researcher memo regarding the same activity indicated:

> There was a lot of reading here for each group to do – this may have been a factor in them understanding the basic background knowledge of their dynasty and perhaps why they were confused with some of the key considerations and how they fit into/helped to answer the overarching question. (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, January 18, 2012)
Regarding the difficulty level of a reading, similar frustrations were expressed and observed in regards to the readings that I provided for Activity 1. Student B’s (personal communication, January, 12, 2012) questionnaire response regarding what parts of the activity she found challenging stated that, “The readings and Analects were hard to understand but gave a lot of information.” In addition, my researcher memos and the assessment of student work reflected on student difficulties as well. Regarding student experiences working with these readings I wrote, “I found myself continuously prompting students to read beyond ‘the five-basic relationships’ paragraph for more detailed information that could answer the question and to not forget about the Analects” (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, January 9, 2012). Likewise, I also reflected that, “Some students today and on Friday experienced some frustration with the Analects in terms of what it was saying. . . . This frustration could potentially lead to fatigue” (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, January 9, 2012). In addition, rubric findings suggested that students’ struggled with integrating sources and using specific detail to answer the question both on the visual metaphor and in the written statement. In many respects the data that students provided regarding these challenges might have been impacted by both the number and difficulty of the readings.

**Summation of Finding 3**

The individual and focus group interviews, student questionnaire responses, and researcher memos provided insights into how student ability to comprehend and work with varied and multiple sources greatly influenced their use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. While the data from Activities 4, 7, and 8, showed in-text reading aids and visuals could serve as building blocks to student understanding of the past, data also showed that during Activities 1, 3, 4, and 7, many of the sources were a roadblock to learning due to
vocabulary, type of source, and the number and difficulty of the source. As a result, while much of this data supported the initial codes developed from the theoretical framework and the literature review, data analysis also resulted in the development of new codes. Overall, the data provided insights as to how students in my College Prep World History class approached various sources and how those sources interfered with or aided their access to historical evidence and their understanding of the past. The data also shed light on areas in which more teacher support could have improved this access and understanding.

**Finding 4. Student skills in using historical evidence to support an argument to answer an historical question were limited. (This included higher-order thinking skills).**

This finding surfaced from an element of curiosity that emerged during the coding process of the data collected from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and researcher memos, during Activities 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 and from personal teaching experience. While this may be an area in need of future study and data collection, it is worth mentioning as an area of noticeable and ongoing challenges for students enrolled in my College Prep World History classes.

The narrative that follows describes and analyzes data from the individual and focus group interviews, along with my research memos. It suggests overarching questions and higher-order thinking are challenging tasks for students. Therefore, from the research on Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner, along with the literature review, the initial codes that emerged included students having a hard time accepting ideas that differ from their own; prior knowledge may influence student understanding of the past; and teachers need to be aware of the skills students use. As a result, new codes emerged while analyzing this data and are reflected by the subthemes, historical questions and higher-order thinking. These subthemes provided a framework to discuss the data and how students in my College Prep classes differed in their
ability to approach historical questions and how higher-order thinking tasks influenced student understanding of the past.

**Historical questions.** As the introduction to this finding indicates, the data suggested that students struggled with multi-part questions and overarching questions. This was exemplified in Activity 1: *Visual Metaphor - Belief Systems of Asia,* where students created a visual metaphor and explained in a written summary how Confucian beliefs could restore social order and good government in China. As I reflected in my researcher memos:

The assignment itself is more difficult for students than I thought. I figured they would struggle with the visual metaphor but I’m more surprised by their difficulty in answering the question. This was confirmed in the second day when students were still having a hard time answering the question and understanding what it was asking. (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, January 9, 2012)

This difficulty was a surprise because, “I tried to simplify the question so that I was using wording directly from the secondary source [the text book] to act as a guide. There is also a heading in the section that gets at the government piece” (A. R. Plasko, personal communication, January 9, 2012). Even with prompts within the question, students still seemed to struggle to address all parts of it. While this could be a product of too many readings, reading difficulties, and/or the need for teacher modeling and scaffolding, this observation could also suggest that further simplification of the question might be needed. In turn, this might improve the students’ use of historical evidence when making an argument and allow them to better demonstrate their knowledge of the past. As with my observation for Activity 1, Students B, E, and G, expressed similar difficulties with Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty* and understanding the overarching question about their assigned dynasty. As Student B (personal communication, February 9, 2012)
reported during a focus group interview question regarding the dynasty questions, “I guess it’s because it was overall so I didn’t know how to answer it.” Similarly, during the individual interview, Students E (personal communication, February 3, 2012) reported:

I wouldn’t know what to search up if we didn’t have them [key considerations]. It’s like a guideline for us that this is what we need to search and that we can do that. We can’t really find that by ourselves because we don’t really know what to search up if you just gave us the question.

Student G’s (personal communication, February 2, 2012) feedback complemented Student B’s remarks: “I always have trouble with bigger questions when little questions are answering it, then I don’t know what important pieces to pull out of the little ones. So the bigger ones always stress me out.” Student G (personal communication, February 2, 2012) went on to say:

I find anything that’s big or that requires a lot of writing very overwhelming, but again if I take it piece by piece and if I figure ok, this helps answer this question because, and then you explain that and then you keep taking it piece by piece that helps me.

Student G’s response, in particular showed that despite being “overwhelmed at first” when presented with a larger question or a task that requires a lot of writing, she knew what steps to employ to make it more manageable. This was a helpful insight in that it became beneficial to learn what types of skills students in my College Prep classes had when they approach larger questions.

Finally, Students B, E, and G’s responses to Activity 3’s dynasty questions supported the data that emerged from Activity 5: Buy My Dynasty Body Paragraph. Activity 5 served as a follow-up to Activity 3 and was given as a question on their Unit 6 test. For the test question, all of the dynasty unit questions were provided and the students were asked to use historical
evidence to write a paragraph to answer one of these unit questions. Per the instructions, they could choose any dynasty they wanted except for the one to which they were assigned. The findings from the rubric used to assess responses to the question supported the challenges that students faced with Activity 3. Overall, the evidence used in their paragraph to answer the test question was limited. While this outcome could have been due to a myriad of other challenges that students reported on when discussing Activity 3, such as quality of worksheets, vocabulary, phrasing of question, and number of readings, Student B, E, and G’s responses suggest that difficulties in answering the question may have started with the broadness of the question itself and the need for teacher clarity when asking such historical questions.

Higher-order thinking. The data also suggested that student skills in using historical evidence to support an argument to answer an historical question were limited. These tasks, such as ones that required students to think objectively and assess the quality or reliability of a source, made it difficult for students to work with historical evidence and to understand the past. As stated in researcher memos, Activity 2: China’s Dilemma proved to be challenging for students as they grappled with their own morals. For this activity, in groups, students assumed the role of “scholar” of their assigned Chinese belief system and determined, based on its principles, what advice they would give to the last ruler of the Han Dynasty to restore order to China and to restore the faith of the Chinese people as the dynasty neared its end. In order to complete this task, students reviewed their Fall of the Han Dynasty chart and the readings for their specific belief system that they had read from a previous lesson. Using evidence from these resources, students created a poster and wrote a summary describing their solution to the problem. A Round Table discussion was then held. Researcher memos highlighted the challenges students faced while completing this activity and are presented in Figure 5.
Ultimately, students found it difficult to overcome their own judgments, presenting a hurdle for problem solving, which was evident in both the group work and the Round Table discussion. As a result, the data suggested that historical evidence that contradicted students’ own knowledge or, in this case moral belief, prevented students from assessing historical evidence objectively and ultimately prevented them from thoroughly considering various ways to answer an historical question.

In addition Activity 6: Charlemagne Primary Sources Organizer and Body Paragraph, asked students, with a partner, to read, mark-up, and annotate two primary source accounts about Charlemagne, fill out a primary source organizer, and answer the following question: Did Charlemagne deserve to be given the title “Charlemagne the Great”? After reviewing both the
primary source organizer and assessing students’ body paragraphs, rubrics showed that they were able to understand the sources but had a hard time distinguishing between fact and bias when making an argument about Charlemagne. For those students that could identify the two, they were unable to use the issue of reliability in arguing for or against Charlemagne’s “greatness”. As a result, rubric findings showed that students struggled with higher-level critical thinking, which required students to consider how the author impacted the legitimacy of the source they were reading. The limited use of historical evidence, particularly when making an argument, was not only noteworthy during this research study; it had been a noticeable pattern during my teaching career. The limited use of historical evidence used by students in a College Prep class could hinder their understanding of the past, especially without proper teacher instruction.

**Summation of Finding 4**

Finding 4 emerged from data that corresponded with ongoing teacher experiences regarding student difficulties in using historical evidence to answer an historical question. The data from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and researcher memos suggested that student skills in using historical evidence to support an argument to answer an historical question were limited during Activities 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. The new codes that emerged mirrored the subthemes *overarching questions* and *higher-order thinking* and showed that students in my College Prep classes were having difficulty with these types of tasks. This data may serve as an opportunity for further research into how such roadblocks may hinder students’ ability to understand the past as they struggle to make sense of how historical evidence fits into a larger picture.
Conclusion

Based on the data collected from student interviews, student questionnaires, student work, and researcher memos, across eight activities from two contiguous units, four findings emerged that answered the research question. This data revealed that in my College Prep World History class, teacher instruction, the format of activities, student ability to work with a variety of sources, and student ability to use historical evidence to support an argument impacted student understanding of the past. The themes that emerged from the coding process and that led to these findings were also connected to developmental theory and the literature review. In some instances, however, new codes emerged during the data analysis process. As a result, the data presentations and analyses, in conjunction with the theoretical framework and review of the literature, provided an opportunity to reflect on how these research findings had greater implications for the research question and educational practice. A more detailed discussion of the findings in terms of their significance to developmental theory and the literature on student understanding of the past, along with the implications for educational practice, is presented in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

Introduction

A review of the literature specific to developmental theory, student historical understanding, and student voice, showed there had been very little written about how students, who had been placed in a History course that focused on content and skill support, understood the past. More specifically, there had been little research conducted on how students, who needed this support interacted with and understood the historical concept of evidence, which is pertinent to both student understanding of the past and the development of historical thinking skills. Therefore the purpose of this study was centered on answering the following research question:

*How do ninth grade students who have been placed in a College Prep World History class explain how they understand the past through the use of historical evidence?*

The collection of data for this research study took place in a ninth grade regular education College Prep World History classroom in a public school district west of Boston, Massachusetts. A total of nine students, eight girls and one boy, participated in this six-week research study. Because Student D participated reluctantly, out of respect for that student, that data were not included. The study took place across two contiguous units in our World History curriculum, after the collection and analysis of data, the following four findings emerged:

- Teacher instructional language, scaffolding, and modeling strongly influenced students’ ability to use historical evidence to explain their understanding of the past.
- The format of activities strongly influenced student use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. (This included group work and MKO, as well as visual and written data produced by students).
• Student ability to comprehend and work with varied and multiple sources greatly influenced their use of historical evidence and their understanding of the past. (This included primary and secondary sources readings, visuals, and the integration of sources).

• Student skills in using historical evidence to support an argument to answer an historical question were limited. (This included higher-order thinking skills).

This chapter is organized to explain the significance of the research findings in terms of the research question. In doing so, the first two sections shed light on the significance of these findings in terms of the theoretical framework and the literature review. As a reminder of the discussion on ableism in Chapter 1, terms such as “learning disabled” and “learning disabilities” will be included only within the context of how they were used by both developmental theorists and researchers discussion in their study of the past. Following the discussion of the significance of these findings is the section on the implications for educational practice and future research, which, as alluded to in Chapter 1, includes my reflection on the factors that influenced this research study. This chapter will conclude with a section that summarizes the impact of this study on personal experiences as a researcher-practitioner.

**Significance of Research to the Theoretical Framework**

The analysis process of the data sources discussed in the previous chapter revealed how the four research findings confirmed, complemented, and complicated elements of the theoretical framework that informed my problem of practice and research question. The theory that composed this framework, developmental theory, will be discussed within the context of these findings and mirror the order in which they were discussed in Chapter 1. It is important to note that the works discussed in the theoretical framework did not specifically discuss the learning process for students who have been placed in a World History course that focuses on content and
skill support. Therefore, this study offered something new to the literature that will be further discussed within the subsections.

**Lev Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians.** Central to developmental theory and my problem of practice were the works of Lev Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians. A major part of Vygostky’s theory is the role of the MKO and the impact that, in the case of the classroom, a teacher or peer can have on student cognitive development. Both Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians supported the notion that such interaction can help students understand others perspectives (Applefield, et al.; Yilmaz 2008). Pertaining specifically to students with learning disabilities, neo-Vygotskians claimed that reciprocal teaching could help students with reading difficulties through the act of summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting (Trent, et al., 1998). While the research study I conducted did not focus on students with learning disabilities, Findings 1 and 2 confirmed both Vygotsky’s theory and that of neo-Vygotskians regarding the benefits of working with others to improve student understanding. This is seen in Finding 1, where individual and focus group interviews revealed instructional language provided by the teacher aided student understanding of the assigned task. This is also confirmed by Finding 2, where student interviews also revealed the benefits of group work, and how collaboration: helped clarify their thinking; challenged them to reconsider the materials they gathered on a topic; and clarified questions they had about the task at hand. Complicating these perspectives however, are the negative aspects of group work expressed by some students during the interview process, particularly around the issue of reading. As some students expressed regarding Activity 4: *The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps*, reading the source individually rather than in pairs would have been more beneficial, because the different reading rates of group members impacted their reading comprehension.
Another major component of Vygotsky’s theory is the use of learning tools to help students acquire knowledge. The first of these is the use of language, mnemonic devices, concepts, and symbols as effective tools for helping students to do so (Karpov & Bransford, 1995). Finding 1 confirmed the benefits of such tools, especially when used as a part of teacher instruction. Some students found the emphasized words and instructional layout of Activity 3, for example, helpful with their understanding of assignment expectations. In complementing Vygotsky’s theory, the data from this research study suggested that visuals could also be considered a symbol, and in turn a tool, that can help student acquisition of knowledge. For example, some students reported that the feudalism pyramid included in the reading for Activity 7: Medieval Social Classes in the Feudal System: A Visual Metaphor helped their understanding of the concept. In addition, some students said the Tang Dynasty maps provided in Activity 4: The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps helped them to understand the reading and overall history of the dynasty.

Vygotsky also suggested strategies such as prompts, explanations, discussions, and collaboration (Gauvain & Cole, 1997) to aid in the internalization process, so students could inherently use these tools when given a specific task without prompting from the MKO. Finding 1 confirmed the need for these strategies. Some students, despite repetition, needed reminders during Activity 6: Charlemagne Primary Source Organizer and Body Paragraph about what the word bias meant. Despite being used many times throughout the year, the meaning of bias had clearly not been internalized by all students.

Similarly, neo-Vygotskians suggested embedding skills and content through the use of problem solving activities and collaboration to help with this internalization process (Trent, et al., 1998). Finding 2 complemented their ideas about embedding skills and content. Previously taught reading skills were embedded within various activities to reinforce these skills and aid in
the internalization process. Although this study could not confirm that this process happened for all students, one student, in discussing Activity 3: Buy My Dynasty, expressed that the requirement for students to mark-up their resources helped her practice this skill, which she acknowledged could help her in the future.

Finally, both Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians suggested that cultural influence impacts the skills and knowledge that students acquire and how they acquire them (Haenen, et al., 2003; Karpov & Bransford, 1995; Miller, 2002). While this study did not address this specifically, a researcher memo supporting Finding 4 about Activity 2’s China’s Dilemma showed some groups had a hard time defending their belief system based on its harsh beliefs in one case, and passive attitudes in the other. As a result, the data complemented the ideas of Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians and suggested that some cultural influence may have influenced their ability to completely empathize with their founder’s belief system.

**Jerome Bruner in light of Vygotsky’s work.** The work of developmental theorist Jerome Bruner was also relevant to the findings of this research study. Extending Vygotsky’s belief that students can learn concepts from peers and adults, Bruner (1977, 1996) believed that students at any age can be taught more sophisticated concepts as long as the concepts are explained in a language students understand. As a result, students will want to learn more difficult concepts and perform more difficult tasks. While this study could not confirm those beliefs, data from Finding 1 complemented them in that student feedback regarding Activity 3 showed that scaffolded instruction helped students to complete more complicated tasks. For example, students reported that the key considerations and emphasized terms from this activity helped them understand their dynasty’s overarching question and activity expectations. Similar
data from Finding 2 complemented Bruner’s beliefs. Some students reported that sub-questions created by their peers helped them understand and answer a dynasty’s overarching question.

The data complicated Bruner’s findings however, in that even with teacher modeling and explanation during the two units of study, some students’ still found it challenging to understand more difficult concepts. For example, as researcher memos from Finding 4 suggested, students’ difficulty in empathizing with their assigned religious leader in Activity 2 interfered with their ability to make an historical argument. In addition, student work from Activity 6 showed their understanding of the two Charlemagne primary sources, yet the students had a difficult time, even with modeling, using the primary source organizer and making an argument about Charlemagne’s legacy. While this data complicated Bruner’s views about student learning, as he did not address students who need more content and skill support, the data also suggested that better teacher modeling may be needed to help students complete the activity.

Bruner (1977) also believed that teachers need to give students an opportunity to grapple with information, discuss it, negotiate their own thinking in terms of others, and consider the multiple perspectives that one may take towards the topic being studied. For students with these skills, Bruner believed that learning would come more easily and would serve as a foundation for more complicated tasks. Research Findings 2 and 3 from this study confirmed this aspect of Bruner’s thinking. Student interviews during Activity 3: Buy My Dynasty suggested how student interaction positively influenced student understanding of the dynasties they were researching, challenged students to clarify their thinking, and find more information on their assigned topic. This opportunity also came during Activity 7: Medieval Social Classes in the Feudal System: A Visual Metaphor. Students demonstrated their knowledge of the Feudal System in the form of a metaphor. As one student reflected, this format challenged her to process content in a way she
was not used to. In addition, while some students were observed having trouble empathizing with religious leaders in Activity 2: *China’s Dilemma*, their conversations around this issue led them to grapple with historical information and consider multiple perspectives in light of their own. While students were given these opportunities, it is unknown whether learning came more easily and served to help them with more complicated tasks.

Finally, as with Vygotsky, Bruner (1977, 1986) also expressed the importance of culture and its impact on student ability to process and negotiate new information in terms of their own prior knowledge. With the exception of student experiences just described for Activity 2, this study did not test for whether or not culture played a role in student learning processes.

**Jean Piaget and neo-Piagetians in light of Vygotsky’s work.** As with Bruner, the works of Piaget and neo-Piagetians resonated with elements of Vygotsky’s theory on cognitive development. Interested in the impact of the environment on child development, Piaget researched how they adapted to new information overtime. Referring to this as cognitive adaptation, Piaget was particularly interested in how children assimilated and accommodated new and complex information with their current knowledge (Miller, 2002). Piaget believed this led to disequilibrium, where students react to this information in a variety of ways, including ignoring it and altering their thinking to accommodate it (Yilmaz, 2008). As a solution to this, Piaget suggested using steps to help students negotiate their knowledge with new information (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2008). Finding 4 complemented Piaget’s thinking to the extent to which students had difficulty fulfilling Activity 2’s task requirements due to their own feelings about their assigned belief system. As a result, this interfered with their ability to solve “China’s Dilemma”. In terms of Piaget’s point regarding the use of steps to help students consider prior knowledge in light of their own, this study did not use this suggestion in this context. Data for
Finding 1, Activity 3 of this study did show, however, that some students were overwhelmed by the amount of information provided in the instructions. Therefore, a disequilibrium may occur within this context, and as a result, could interfere with students understanding of activity expectations and their historical understanding of the past. Therefore, Finding 1 complemented this aspect of Piaget’s thinking.

Neo-Piagetians believed a teacher should be aware of the strategies students have and employ when faced with a task (Case, 1993; Morra, et al., 2008). While Findings 1 through 4 of this study confirmed the importance of this knowledge, as data previously discussed showed the degrees of effectiveness of instructional language and format activities, along with student difficulty interacting with multiple sources, answering an historical question, and higher-order thinking, the data also added something new to the literature as well. As a researcher-practitioner, I was aware of some of the strategies that students on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) used based on information it contained and discussions with their Special Education and Reading teachers. Even with that knowledge, this study showed that teacher modeling and instruction and using known strategies students had learned, were still not enough, at times, to help students acquire thorough historical understanding of a topic. In addition, because students reported anxiety over the length of instruction and the initial use of technology for Activity 3, it is important for teachers to know what type of strategies student have, if any, to address this anxiety. To this end, this study offered something new to the literature in that the data showed the need for more effective instructional strategies to help students in the College Prep history classes achieve skill and content goals.

While the works of Vygotsky, complemented by those of Bruner and Piaget generally apply to the findings in this study, this study complicated their thinking on developmental theory
and suggested a few gaps. First, their work did not specifically address how effective these strategies are for the cognitive development of students placed in a World History course focused on content and skill support. Secondly and more specifically, while their suggestions are applicable to History education, this study offered new and specific insights as to how students placed in this type of course interpreted and applied some of these strategies within the context of using historical evidence to understand the past. Therefore, in these two ways, this study added to the literature on developmental theory and provided an additional lens to understand students’ cognitive experiences within the History classroom.

The analysis of the research data revealed how the findings of this study confirmed, complemented, and complicated developmental theory. While the findings generally supported developmental theory, gaps were found in the literature as it pertains to applying this theory to how students in a College Prep World History class who need more content and skill support, explain their understanding of the past when they use historical evidence. As a result of this study, the data and findings offered something new to the literature and also revealed areas where more research is needed.

**Significance of Research to the Literature Review**

As with the previous section, the analysis process of the data sources discussed in Chapter 4 revealed how the four findings confirmed, complemented, and complicated the bodies of literature that informed my problem of practice. While the literature discussed student interaction with different historical concepts and offered some strategies for students with disabilities, researchers did not specifically use student participants that had been placed in a World History course focused on content and skill support. The findings of this study offered something new to the literature that is discussed within the subsections and in this section’s
conclusion. The discussion of the literature is presented in the same order as it was discussed in Chapter 2.

**Cognitive development and student understanding of the past.** The literature regarding how cognitive development affected student understanding of the past stressed the need for teacher knowledge of student cognitive abilities, specifically in the areas of reading comprehension, note taking, and the judging of sources (Mastropieri, et al., 2003). In referencing students with learning disabilities, Mastropieri, et al. (2003) specifically suggested that they might find independent reading, note taking, and other tasks difficult to accomplish. While students with learning disabilities were not the subject of this study, the data from Findings 1 and 3 confirmed student difficulties with reading comprehension and judging the relevancy of information in their reading materials. Activities 1: *Visual Metaphor – Belief Systems of Asia* and 3: *Buy My Dynasty* specifically highlighted the difficulty students had, not only with the content depth of sources, but also the number of them. As one student reported regarding Activity 3, she did not know how to manage the amount of information given by the readings in a way that could apply to their overarching question and other project requirements. This was also seen in Activity 4, as some students reported difficulty in marrying the information provided by the maps of the Tang Dynasty to the accompanied reading on the Battle of the Talas River. Adding to this, Greene (1994) suggested that student interpretation of tasks affect the way in which they write and think about the past. While this study did not compare specific student interpretations to their individual work, data from Activities 1 and 6 in support of Finding 1, complemented Green’s viewpoint. In regards to Activity 1 and the historical question about Confucius, one student reported that the instructions needed clarity in terms of how much and what information should be included in the written response.
Similarly, researcher memos regarding Activity 6: Charlemagne Primary Source Organizer and Body Paragraph, reflected student difficulty distinguishing between the first two columns of their Charlemagne primary source chart. This in turn could have impacted student ability to answer the historical question regarding Charlemagne’s “greatness”. In support of Finding 4, researcher memos reported that student paragraphs showed student difficulty in distinguishing “bias” from “fact” when making their argument. The data discussed in support of the these two findings also complemented Mastropieri, et al.’s, (2003) assertions that teacher assumptions about student skill level may be inaccurate leading to students’ inability to meet teacher expectations and course demands.

This body of literature also discussed the impact of student prior knowledge on their views of past events and people (Green, 1994; Haenen, et al., 2003; Karpov & Bransford, 1995; Miller, 2002; Stearns, et al., 2000; Wineburg & Fournier, 1994; Yilmaz, 2008). While Wineburg and Fournier’s (1994) idea about presentism, where personal views influence the understanding of the past, was not tested during this study, it was inadvertently confirmed by data from Activity 2: China’s Dilemma in support of Finding 4. This is reflected in researcher memos that shed light on how some students struggled to ignore their own biases and moral codes as they assumed the role of a specific founder’s belief systems.

While the findings of this study both confirmed and complemented the current literature regarding cognitive development and student understanding of the past, they also offered a new insight as well. While the existing literature concerned student cognitive development and student understanding of the past in terms of second-order concepts such as contextualization, change, empathy, historical significance, and causation, this study specifically focused on how students in a College Prep World History class, who need more content and skill support,
explained their understanding of the past when they used historical evidence. As a result, this study revealed some of the cognitive challenges that students faced when trying to understand the past in this light.

**Current research regarding how students with different abilities understand the past.** In many respects the body of literature regarding how students with different abilities understand the past is related to the previous section on cognitive development. It was largely focused on how students empathize, rate historical significance, and view time. As a result, this body of literature contained a number of studies where data was gathered to explore student historical understanding specific to these historical concepts, and not the use of historical evidence. Therefore, with some exceptions, most of the data from this research study complemented the existing body of literature.

Several studies revealed how students rate the past. Seixas’ (1993) study of how students alter their knowledge of history and rate the reliability of a source found that students relied on family experience to determine source credibility. This is similar to the findings of Carretero, et al. (1994), where adolescents ranked the cause for historical change based on their personal desires, and that of Yeager, et al.’s (2002) research study that found students generalized events and rated historical significance in terms of both positive and negative human behavior. Data supporting Finding 4 complemented these findings in that some students demonstrated conflict with their own morals in trying to assume the role of the founder of their belief system in Activity 2. As I noted in a researcher memo, one group was frustrated with how passive Daoists were and therefore, they did not like the position they had to take to solve “China’s Dilemma”. Seixas’ (1993) study also found that students were unsure about how to critically approach sources while the findings of Yeager, et al.’s (2002) study showed that students did not have the
background knowledge or tools to examine challenging historical sources. Findings 3 and 4 and the data from Activities 1 through 4 of this study complemented these findings. Both student data and researcher memos revealed the limitations of student tools when approaching various historical sources. For example, data from Activity 4: *The Battle of the Talas River Reading and Maps* showed that student knowledge varied in how to read the maps showing the rise and decline of the Tang Dynasty. As a result, these maps either confused or helped student understanding of their accompanying reading on the Battle of the Talas River.

Finally, while much of the literature in this section did not address students who needed more content and skill support, the studies of De La Paz and MacArthur (2003) and Bulgren, et al., (2007), did discuss students with learning disabilities. Their studies confirmed and complemented the findings of this study, respectively. De La Paz and MacArthur (2003) suggested for students with learning disabilities and, more specifically, for those with reading disabilities, a variety of sources, such as textbooks and primary sources could interfere with their understanding of the past. While students with learning disabilities were not the subject of this study, Finding 3 confirmed that some student participants experienced such difficulty, reflected in student data from Activities 1: *Visual Metaphor – Belief Systems of Asia* and 3: *Buy My Dynasty*. Data from Finding 2 however, offered something new to their work and suggested that visual sources also can hinder student understanding, as was revealed by student feedback on the Tang Dynasty Maps. Additionally, Bulgren, et al. (2007) suggested that students with learning disabilities might have difficulties distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information. While this study did not specifically test for this in student work, data for Activities 1 and 3 in support of Finding 3 complemented their suggestions. Students reported that it was hard to pick out relevant information due to the amount of readings they received.
Overall, with the exceptions discussed in the previous paragraph, this body of literature only complemented the findings of this research study because most of the literature did not specifically pertain to student use of historical evidence or specifically include students who needed more content and skill support as subjects in their studies. Therefore, this study offered something new to the current literature in this regard. It should be mentioned that one element of the study by Carretero, et al. (1994) did pertain to the study of time and, therefore, was not discussed here because the topic and findings did not relate to this research study.

The effect of instructional strategies on the learning of the past. This third body of literature offered insights into the effectiveness of instructional strategies and student use of historical skills to understand the past. It is important to note, that unless otherwise indicated, many of the instructional strategies employed by researchers in the literature were not used in this study. In addition, none of the literature specifically focused on student use of historical evidence to understand the past, and with one exception, did not specifically study how students who need more content and skill support were affected by instructional practices. Due to these factors, the findings of this study confirmed and complicated elements of the existing literature while offering new perspectives as well.

Specific to Kohlmeier’s (2005) study on how various instructional prompts impacted student historical thinking skills, Findings 2, 3, and 4 complicated her findings. In Kohlmeier’s (2005) study, students examined primary sources, participated in a Socratic seminar, and wrote an historical narrative. She found that in using these three strategies concurrently student historical thinking skills became more in depth and more critical. While this study did not assess the same skills or use all of the same instructional strategies, the data supporting Findings 2, 3, and 4 complicated these findings because they showed the roadblocks students in the College
Prep class faced during a multi-step process. In Activity 1: Visual Metaphor – Belief Systems of Asia, students were asked to read sources about Confucius and to identify evidence that answered the historical question, to create a metaphor using that evidence, and then in a written response, to explain how their metaphor answered the question. Data from student feedback and researcher memos showed that students struggled with the following: the number of sources they were given, identifying important evidence from the sources, displaying their historical knowledge in a metaphor, and answering the question about Confucius. While a number of other factors, such as teacher modeling and instructional clarity may have helped in these areas, the data suggested that different aspects of a multi-step process could be affected if students find difficulty in one of those steps.

Also complicating Kohlmeier’s study were researcher memos supporting Finding 4. They reported the difficulty students had with higher levels of critical thinking during Activity 6. For this activity, students needed to critically analyze the Charlemagne primary sources, fill out a primary source organizer with a partner, and then individually answer an historical question about Charlemagne. Despite this multi-step process and, again considering that better teacher modeling may have helped, the rubric used to assess student work showed that despite understanding the sources, students had a hard time distinguishing fact from bias in their written responses. As a result, students had difficulty considering how the authors impacted the legitimacy of their sources. These examples, therefore, not only complicated Kohlmeier’s (2005) study; they more generally offered something new to the literature because they showed how students, who needed more content and skill support, could struggle with various instructional strategies, isolated or concurrent, both which could ultimately influence their understanding of the past.
Bain’s (2008) research stressed that many students use historical thinking skills but need teacher guidance to master them. Bain found reflective journal writing, note-taking models, peer discussion, peer reading, and the use of artifacts, helped his students understand historical context, empathy, and the assessment of historical significance. He also found that students began to look at sources more critically. Moreover, Bain had students take on roles such as “questioner” to help students examine sources as they peer-read them. In addition, he had the class create a list of criteria that evaluated historical significance. This list, visible in the classroom and used throughout the year to judge different events, is similar to Tishman, et al.’s (1995) ideas about the establishment of classroom language to facilitate critical thinking. While this study did not use similar teaching strategies or test for the same skills, as previously discussed, data supporting Finding 1 confirmed the importance of teacher modeling, while it complicated Finding 2 in terms of the impact that peer reading had on student understanding.

Finally, Foster’s (1999) work on historical empathy stressed the importance for students to learn to evaluate the past without present standards. Although he did not reveal the outcomes of giving his students an historical problem that required empathy, and while not testing for it in this study, data from Activity 2 in support of Finding 4 offered something new to the literature, because students struggled with the historical concept of empathy as they tried to find a solution to “China’s Dilemma”.

Specific to the literature that addressed instructional strategies for students with learning disabilities, De La Paz, et al. (2007) suggested providing reading question prompts, scaffolding, and teacher modeling to promote student understanding of readings. Data from Activities 1, 3, and 4, in support of Finding 3, confirmed the need for teacher modeling to promote student understanding of resources. For example, two students reported for Activity 4 that the Tang
Dynasty maps helped in their understanding of the Battle of the Talas River. On the other hand, some students reported that the maps confused them because they were unsure of what the maps were showing. Teacher modeling of how to read the maps could have benefited the students’ understanding of the maps and ultimately the events leading to the rise and fall of the Tang Dynasty. Adding something new to this literature is data from Activity 7: *Medieval Social Classes in the Feudal System: A Visual Metaphor* that suggested reading aids such as steps and visuals provided within a reading can help students who need more skill support understand a source. Two students mentioned that the bold terms and the organization of their Feudal System reading helped their understanding of the reading.

Contributing to the body of literature regarding students with learning disabilities, Mastropieri, et al. (2003) found that students with learning disabilities, paired with a higher-performing peer reader, had better content understanding than students who participated in teacher directed instruction. While the activities in this research study did not specifically pair students with higher performing readers, data supporting Finding 2 complicated their findings regarding the effectiveness of group work on student understanding of the past. For example, students commented on how sharing their research information with their peers did help them discover if they needed more information on their topic during Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty*. On the other hand, when students participated in Activity 4, some reported that reading out loud with peers complicated their understanding of the source because of different reading pace and personal learning style.

While this study confirmed and complicated the literature on effective instructional strategies, data from Findings 1 through 4 also offered new insights that revealed how instructional strategies specifically impacted students in a College Prep World History class. For
example, data from Activity 7, in support of Finding 2, showed some students’ understanding of the past benefited from creating the Feudalism visual metaphor as it helped them process and demonstrate their knowledge in a different way, while others found it did not help them. Data from Activity 3, on the other hand, suggested that student participants were challenged by overarching questions and higher-order thinking skills. Finally, the data also showed how students learning preferences varied, for example, with activities that required peer reading and group work. Therefore, this study provided specific insights into how instructional strategies affected the learning of the past for students who needed more content and skill support as they used historical evidence.

**Incorporating student voice in the learning process in history education.** The body of literature regarding student voice and its incorporation in the learning process discussed the implications for using student feedback on student achievement, motivation, and knowledge about learning styles. In doing so it also offered student and teacher perspectives on this topic. Because such literature is in its infancy, the findings of this study confirmed and complicated elements of the existing literature while offering new perspectives as well. The discussion of this body of literature was divided into four subsections in Chapter 3, which are used again here.

**Rationale for student voice.** The literature that discussed the rationale for using student voice stressed the importance of seeking student perspectives regarding school reform and classroom experiences. Sands, et al. (2007) stressed that excluding student voice from school reform would limit teacher understanding of student experiences in the classroom and in the school. Rudduck (2002) also discussed the need to understand how early access to technology has shaped Generation Y. Student interviews from Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty*, in support of Finding 2, provided interesting insights on students’ views of technology. These students’ views
confirmed the researchers’ sentiments about the importance of understanding student experiences. When asked about using a poster versus the originally planned wiki page to present their advertisement, one student mentioned her fear of technology while another revealed that in preparing the poster, group members were able to easily make changes because they could lay out their materials and visually see how it looked, something they felt could not be done by using a computer. While this is a small sample, it does suggest that for students who have grown up with technology, some may not be as comfortable using it as educators think, or at least in terms of technological tools used specifically in the classroom.

In addition, while this will be addressed in more detail under Classroom perspectives, student survey responses and interviews provided more particulars and explanations for how they interacted with activity instruction and resource materials, from which researcher memos and observations could not glean alone. While the memos included notes about student difficulties and hypothesized the reasons behind them, student feedback helped to affirm, refute, or add to the hypotheses. For example, researcher memos supporting Finding 4 indicated surprise about student difficulty in answering Activity 1’s question about Confucius. In support of Finding 1, the student questionnaire given at the end of this activity revealed instructions impeded one student’s understanding of the question because the instructions impacted her understanding of what and how much information to include in answering the question.

Finally, Lincoln (1995), Sands, et al., (2007), and Cook-Sather (2006) believed that seeking student opinions instills the belief that student opinion matters both in and outside of school, especially if their opinions are acknowledged and used by their teachers to make change. Student feedback provided the majority of the data for Findings 1 through 4. It confirmed that the use of student voice could empower students in their own learning environment. As the
researcher-practitioner, I stressed to student participants, both before and during this research study, that the value of their feedback and the findings of this study would impact not only future lessons during their school year, but also the many school years and students that followed.

During the interview process, this stakeholder quality emerged at times as student participants seemed excited when they mingled in the hallway prior to being interviewed and as we discussed the interview process. Participants also at times referenced the study during class. The opportunity to provide feedback in different ways was also beneficial in that some participants were shy during individual interviews but more vocal during the focus groups and vice versa.

**Student Perspective.** The literature regarding student perspectives on the use of student voice in the classroom, in many ways, echoed the rationale for using it. It did, however, delve a bit deeper into how students felt their opinion about classroom experiences could help teachers improve instructional time. O’Connell-Schmakel’s (2008) study found that students’ viewpoints on motivation and achievement were connected to motivational instruction, where students connected fun during learning to their motivation, interest, and achievement levels. To this end, the author recommended playing games to help with content learning along with the need for more individualized help, challenges based on learning styles, the use of student voice, the need for more modern materials and textbooks, and the use of technology and group work. Students also recommended more demanding activities and less repetition and bookwork. As with O’Connel-Schmakel’s (2008) findings, students in Defur and Korinek’s (2010) study also stated that making learning fun helped them to do well. To this end, Defur and Korinek (2010) suggested using experiments, hands-on learning, and the use of act-it-outs. They also recommended more group work and being more active in the classroom. Similarly, the work of
Kinchin (2004) found students supported a constructivist curriculum approach rather than an objectivist one.

While this research study did not reflect the topics of the three studies referenced in the previous paragraph, data from Activity 3 and 4 in support of Finding 2 complicated student preferences regarding the use of technology and group work, in that some students found the latter to be both helpful and a hindrance to their understanding of the past. For example, during Activity 3: *Buy My Dynasty*, some students enjoyed working in groups as a means for better understanding content, realizing the need for more research, and the ability to take on a leadership role. On the other hand, in regards to Activity 4, one student responded that working with partners interfered with her understanding of the source because her peers were reading too fast.

In terms of students with learning disabilities, while Defur and Korinek (2010) reported on how some students on Individualized Education Plans wanted their teachers to understand them, know that they had one, and to trust their knowledge about what it contained, Defur and Korinek did not specifically report on their learning style preferences. Similarly, the work of Rudduck (2002) discussed how students interpreted teacher actions and how they sometimes felt labeled or received no recognition when they had improved their behavior or grades. In terms of reluctant learners, Daniels and Arapostathis’ (2005) study reported student disengagement from school was due to interest in activities as they related to their own lives and personal goals, along with the lack of understanding of instructions and assignments, and negative student-teacher relationships.

Although in this research study, I did not specifically target student participants that were diagnosed with learning disabilities or considered to be at risk, this study offered something new
to the literature in that it involved the feedback of students who had been placed in a College Prep World History course in order to receive more content and skill support. More specifically, since this study pertained to how they explained their understanding of the past as they used historical evidence, the data supporting Findings 1 through 4 of this study revealed student perspectives on instructional language, the format of activities, their ability to work with different sources, and their use of historical evidence to answer an historical question.

**Teacher Perspective.** The body of literature on teacher perspectives in regards to seeking student feedback about achievement, motivation, and learning styles revealed teachers were tentative about seeking student feedback, and when they had, had done so with mixed results. Rodgers’ (2006) study discussed how descriptive feedback could provide teachers with information about student learning that may not be apparent through observation alone. Data supporting Findings 1 through 4 of this study confirmed Rodgers’ findings that student feedback can provide greater insight into student learning. The Rationale for student voice section included an example of this from Finding 4 where researcher memos revealed surprise regarding the difficulty some students had answering the question on Confucius for Activity 1: Visual Metaphor- Belief Systems of Asia. In the student questionnaires, students revealed what they found both challenging and easy about the question. Similar experiences can be found throughout this study where student feedback was sought. As a result, they provided insights into their interpretation of activity instructions, resources, and historical questions, as well as the degree to which learning styles aligned with activity instructions, requirements, and format. For example, students reported the need for historical context and repetition for Activity 3 in support of Finding 1, and that creating a visual metaphor both helped and hindered student understanding of the Feudal System for Activity 7 in support of Finding 2. Data from Findings 1 through 4 also
confirmed Rodgers’ (2006) finding that descriptive feedback allowed quiet students to voice their opinions about learning. This study found this to be the case, not only through the use of student questionnaire’s for Activities 1, 4, and 7, but also with the individual and focus group interviews. To this point, the data from Finding 1 showed that in discussion of Activity 3, student C, when asked, did not discuss the wording of her assigned research question as an impediment to her understanding of it, but did so during the focus group interview.

While McIntyre, et al.’s (2005) study revealed teacher discomfort with accepting student feedback, some teachers in their study did acknowledge similar benefits to student feedback found in Rodgers’ (2006) study. To this end, the teachers in McIntyre, et al.’s (2005) study reported that student feedback ultimately reaffirmed teacher instincts about changing their own practices, making lesson goals more explicit, and whether or not to reuse new initiatives. In addition, it also highlighted the gap between teacher expectations and perceptions and what was actually internalized or realized by students. As the sole researcher-practitioner of this study, I empathized with teacher feelings of anxiety about seeking student feedback. Student feedback, however, was always constructive and ultimately helped achieve my goals: to learn the perspectives of students in my College Prep World History class regarding the influence of the activities and resources they were given on their understanding of the past. Due to this experience, I would not hesitate to seek student feedback again. As a result, given the research participants and topic of this study, it not only offered something new to the current literature, but also it confirmed areas in which I wanted to improve my practice.

Classroom Practices. Building off of the literature for Teacher perspective, this study confirmed Rudduck’s (2002) suggestions that in seeking student feedback, one not only learns more about student abilities and classroom perspectives, but the feedback also allows for the
reexamination of teaching practices, both of which could lead to feelings of reinvigoration for the teaching profession. Rodgers’ (2006) study offered various ways to seek such feedback both through surveys, which gives every student a voice, verbally, and through discussion, which gives students the benefit of listening to each other’s ideas and opinions. Similarly, Lincoln (1995) suggested using the Socratic method, where open-ended questions allow students to draw on experiences in and outside of the classroom. Findings 1 through 4 confirmed that these methods were helpful in seeking student feedback because some students demonstrated they were more comfortable giving verbal feedback in a group setting rather than an individual setting, and vice versa.

Finally, the literature from Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) and Delpit (1988) offered insights into how seeking feedback from reluctant learners, students-of-color, and low-income students can encourage teachers to understand student cultures, how students-of-color perceive successful teachers, and how students-of-color and low-income students receive instruction. In discussing reluctant learners, Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) encouraged teachers to create learning opportunities by appealing to their talents. Delpit (1988), referring to the “culture of power” that exists within society, believed that this culture impacts the education of students-of-color and low-income students. Therefore, acknowledgement of this culture within the classroom would help to create a more equal society. Delpit also wrote that students-of-color and low-income students are each use to different directives, and therefore this can inhibit their interpretation of instruction and meaning and, as a result, their learning outcomes. She added that, in order to meet students’ needs, having the curriculum designed by those that share a culture with students-of-color and low-income students would help to ensure their success.
Overall, this study confirmed the literature about the benefits of seeking student feedback regarding classroom practices as a means to gain greater understanding of student learning styles, their interaction with and interpretation of course materials, and to narrow the gap between teacher expectations and student perceptions. This study added to this body of literature in that it specifically provided opportunities for students in my College Prep World History class to voice their opinions about these elements as they used historical evidence to understand the past.

In conclusion, the research data revealed how the four research findings confirmed, complemented, and complicated elements of developmental theory and the literature, student understanding of the past, and student voice. Except where indicated, much of the current literature within these four bodies did not overwhelmingly discuss findings pertaining to how students who need more content and skill support understand the past when they use historical evidence. As a result, this research study offered new insights to the current bodies of literature and, as will be discussed in subsequent sections, has implications for both history and special education, and future research topics.

Implications for Educational Practice and Future Research

Much of the discussion on the data and research findings that emerged during this study revealed that much of the current literature on developmental theory, student understanding of the past, and student voice, did not include student participants who were placed in a World History class that focused on content and skill support. As I alluded to in the Problem of practice discussion in Chapter 1, while this gap in the literature influenced my decision to research this topic of study, this interest initially grew out of my varied experiences working in education.
Well before I began teaching students in the College Prep World History classes at the current research site, I had many opportunities to work with high school students who needed content and skill support. During this time, I learned quickly that some of their peers, teachers, and members of the community at large stigmatized students who need this support. As a result of this categorization, I have heard the following sentiments about such classes and the students that take them: that the class is too easy, that little learning takes place in them, that a teacher has to focus more on discipline than content, and that students who need such support are lazy, not smart, not invested in their education, and are incapable of being academically challenged. And students who need this support are very aware of this stigmatization.

Since beginning my career in education, and more specifically since having the opportunity to teach College Prep classes, it has been my goal to eliminate this stigma by providing students in the ninth grade College Prep course with the same academic experiences as their peers taking the other leveled courses we offer: Advanced College Prep and Honors, classes I have also taught. For me, this meant ensuring that students in my College Prep classes were given intellectual access and equal opportunities to engage in the ninth grade curriculum. In doing so, I have tried to build trusting and caring relationships with students in my College Prep classes, while at the same time demonstrating pedagogical care by creating a classroom environment that is not only challenging but reflective. In terms of the former, I tried to give many of the same resources that students received in my Advanced College Prep and Honors classes, to students in my College Prep classes by trying to make these resources more accessible and by providing students with learning tools to aid in their understanding of them. This was done through scaffolding and skill development, some of which has been discussed in this study, and in partnership with Special Educators and the Reading teacher at the high school.
Creating a reflective classroom, as I previously mentioned in Chapter 3, had always been a part of my teaching. It was not until I began this research process, however, that I regularly incorporated student voice as a learning tool to help maintain a challenging learning environment. This is what made the students feedback in this study so important. The collaborative learning process between students and myself created a picture of student experiences that I could not always glean from observation alone, as the students interacted with historical content. The seeking of student feedback also demonstrated to students that I felt the best way to learn about their experiences and the affect of my teaching practices was by working together.

In addition, I learned from students about how activity formats and instructional language impacted their historical understanding. The candidness with which students spoke about their experiences, knowing that they were being critical in doing so, speaks to the importance of establishing a trusting relationship between students and teachers. It also demonstrates the necessity for establishing an environment where students are asked to actively reflect on their educational experiences, an essential part of the learning process for both students and teachers. In addition, and as equally important, student feedback illustrated student interaction with rich historical content, critical thinking, and metacognitive processes. This feedback also demonstrated the type of learning that takes place in College Prep classes and the type of investment that students who take this course have in their own learning. As a result, I hope this study has helped to debunk the stigma that many hold about such classes and the students that take them.

As a result of the feedback provided about student experiences in the classroom, I was able to reflect upon my own teaching practices. To this end, I hope to increase the accessibility
of the historical materials students receive and provide helpful instruction of historical thinking tools, so that student can engage in the historical thinking that our curriculum asks of them.

Finally, as I have already alluded to, this research study has been transformative, in that it greatly impacted my teaching practices and my outlook on how to use the research process as a form of dialogue between students and teachers. Not only did it allow those that were marginalized to have a voice, but it also helped to establish a culture where this voice was valued and relevant. As a result of this research process, I feel I have the foundation for continuing to learn about student experiences for making effective changes in my classroom.

Therefore, as a result of my experiences in education and, more specifically, my experiences during this research study, the implications for educational practice and future research discussed in the following sections not only stem from the findings of this study and the gaps in the literature, but from the roots in which they began.

**Implications for educational practice.** The findings of this action research study suggest a number of implications for educational practices not only in history education but also for special education as well. In addition, given the nature of this study and its participants, there are implications for students and parents due to their inherent involvement in the educational process.

**Implications for History education.** The research findings of this study have implications for History education due to the research participation of students in a College Prep World History course focused on content and skill support, and the feedback they provided across two contiguous World History units. As was discussed in both the *Significance of Research to the Theoretical Framework* and the *Significance of Research to the Literature Review* sections, Findings 1 through 4 of this study offered new insights to the current literature
regarding how language, presentation of instruction, activity format, and unit resources impacted student understanding of the past as they used historical evidence. The findings suggest that student feedback should be an integral part of history education in order to ensure that curriculum goals regarding historical understanding and skill development are being met. In doing so, teachers will be able to better evaluate, beyond their own observations and hypotheses, the extent to which their instruction and expectations help students achieve those goals.

In addition, these findings also may have implications for how instructional time is allocated within the history classroom. For example, Finding 4 demonstrated the challenges student had with higher-order thinking and overarching questions. As a result, it is worth considering the benefits and drawbacks to whether or not more instructional time should be spent on skill development and less time given to fulfilling grade level content requirements. The research findings, along with the teaching experiences of this researcher-practitioner regarding student interaction with various sources, regarding their ability to examine the past objectively, and regarding their ability to make an historical argument, suggest that this may be necessary when teaching students in College Prep World History classes to help them improve their reading, writing, and historical thinking skills and, ultimately, their understanding of the past.

**Implications for educators in History education.** History educators are faced with the tasks to find the most effective ways to communicate expectations to students, to develop challenging but manageable activities and tasks, and to provide students with the tools to access and comprehend a variety of historical resources. In doing so, and as indicated in the previous paragraph, the use of student voice by educators, as a means to gain feedback around student understanding, was shown by this study to have many benefits. Not only did the use of student voice shed light on student acquisition of content and their use of historical thinking skills, but it
also provided feedback as to how instructional language, activity formats, and modeling impeded or aided student learning. More specifically, Findings 1 through 4 of this study revealed the benefits and drawbacks of scaffolding; the importance of not making assumptions about student skills; how the same activity, depending on its requirements, can help or hinder student understanding of the past; and how peer reading can limit this understanding as well.

In addition, the findings revealed the importance of not having a one-size-fits-all mentality when it comes to students expressing their understanding of the past. For example, data from Activities 1 and 7 that required students to create a visual metaphor, demonstrated how this format helped and hindered students understanding of the past. Therefore, giving students several opportunities throughout the year to demonstrate their knowledge in a format of their choosing may benefit students and help them to demonstrate their historical knowledge. Allowing students to choose a format could also provide history educators with more specific feedback about the specific learning styles of individual students within a history classroom. Such information provided by student feedback may not be as easily gleaned from classroom observation, as was demonstrated by this study, and/or if applicable, students’ IEP’s. Therefore, student feedback could better inform the educator as they plan future lessons around content and skill development. Given the Teacher perspective discussed in the Significance of the Literature Review section on student voice, this study offered a positive experience that might help encourage other educators to participate in the practice.

Furthermore, the findings of this study offer history educators an opportunity to reflect on their own practices, not just in terms of how they may help or hinder student historical understanding of the past, but also how one evaluates historical understanding of the past. For example, in planning and evaluating student work collected during this research study, I began to
think differently about historical evidence and the evaluation of historical thinking skills. In planning activities, I often thought in terms of the material that needed to be covered, the skills students needed to practice, and the level of critical thinking they would be engaged in. This thinking shifted almost immediately as I planned activities for this study, by putting the historical concept of evidence at the forefront. With this shift in thinking, a new perspective arose regarding the many ways student work could be evaluated. While not discussed in detail as part of the research findings, the various rubrics used in the assessment of student work, such as the one provided in Table 2 in Chapter 3, resulted in reflection about the grading categories I used each term. Rather than use categories such as “Tests”, “Writing”, and “Homework”, the rubrics used in this study provided more meaningful insights regarding student use of historical evidence and critical thinking skills, and could give students, parents, and teachers a clearer picture of student growth over time.

Along with reflection about individual practices within the history classroom, the findings of this study also allow for discussion and collaboration among colleagues regarding how instructional language, the format of activities, student interaction with sources, and student skills in using historical evidence to support an argument, impacted their understanding of the past. Specifically, if seeking student feedback regarding classroom experiences becomes common practice, history educators could share this input, troubleshoot, and discuss different strategies and their outcomes. Such dialogue among colleagues could contribute to common teaching goals across grade and course level, in an effort to increase student access to historical content and improve historical thinking skills. In addition, since there are often students with IEP’s in my College Prep history classes, collaboration with Special Educators and communication of classroom experiences of shared students could help to better understand
student needs. More specifically, as the research revealed, embedding note-taking and reading skills in activities, practiced both in History class and in Learning Centers, still challenged some students. Communicating these results would be beneficial for both History and Special Education teachers and would allow the opportunity to rethink the instruction of these skills moving forward. These types of discussions between History and Special Education teachers, both before, during, and after activities, could be beneficial in helping student understanding of teacher expectations and content material, as well as giving History educators a better understanding of student needs and how to meet them.

**Implications for Special Educators.** The previous paragraph alluded to the benefits of collaboration between History and Special Education teachers in identifying areas in which students who need more content and skill support or who have been diagnosed with a learning disability, may have difficulties with instructional language and historical content. The involvement of Special Educators in this process can also offer new perspectives and ways to troubleshoot that might be overlooked by history educators. In terms of new perspectives, a Special Educator was used for peer debriefing in this study and helped broaden my understanding of what students were saying in the interviews. For example, some students revealed that the length of instructions for Activity 3 caused them anxiety. The Special Educator indicated that the visual layout of instructions could be anxiety inducing for students and suggested either giving students sections of instructions at a time or finding a more creative way to provide them with lengthy instructions.

In addition, Findings 2 and 3 revealed areas in which students had trouble accessing evidence from maps and multiple sources. Special Educators can discuss with History teachers areas in which they observed the need for skill development within history education and, as
previously mentioned, the effectiveness of the skills being taught. With such collaboration, these educators could develop lesson plans for skill building that could be worked on in both classrooms. This would not only provide consistency, but also the development of a common language between teachers when teaching and practicing these skills with students. In addition, these lessons could help all students in the College Prep classes.

**Implications for students and parents/guardians.** Finally, given the action research nature of this study, the role of students in their own education appeared to give them a sense of empowerment. As reported in Chapters 4 and 5, students at times exhibited a sense of excitement during our discussion of the interview process. When students referenced their involvement in the study around their classmates, there was also a subtle sense of pride that was noticed. This pride and excitement was not only sensed among students; it was sensed among some of their parents/guardians as well. After mailing out the Informed Consent documents that described this study and asked for student participants and parental/guardian permission, at IEP meetings I attended parents expressed their appreciation and excitement regarding my research interest. Not only did this study offer a way for parents/guardians and their children to discuss classroom experiences; the study also forged a partnership between parents/guardians, student, and this researcher-practitioner as well, with the common goal of improving History education for students in the College Prep World History classes. Additionally, the findings of this study validated the importance of providing students with opportunities to provide feedback, as the findings showed their insights could not be gleaned through observation alone.

In conclusion, this research study has many implications for educational practice by offering a specific lens into how students placed in a College Prep World History class, designed to focus on more content and skill support, explained their understanding of the past through the
use of historical evidence. The inclusion of student voice allowed me to gauge activity effectiveness and student content understanding and more generally allows for the collaboration among History and Special Education teachers. Finally, this study offered students a stake in their education that they and their parents/guardians not only seemed to appreciate but as the researcher-practitioner, I did as well, as it aimed to improve my own practice, understand student learning experiences, and develop future research interests.

**Implications for future research.** The findings of this research study resulted in a variety of implications for educational practice. First, it shed light on how instructional language, activity format, and historical material impacted students’ understanding of the past in my College Prep course. Secondly, the findings suggested the potential benefits for History and Special Education teachers, working independently and through collaboration, to provide students with the resources and tools to improve their historical understanding. The findings also revealed how students and parents/guardians felt about being stakeholders in their education. As a result, these research findings not only have implications for educational practice but for future research as well.

As indicated throughout the *Significance of Research to the Literature Review* section, very little of the current literature discussed how students, who need more content and skill support, understood the past through the use of historical evidence. This research study, while modest, serves as a jumping off point for future studies regarding these students’ experiences in History education. Two areas in which future researchers could develop studies pertain to Findings 3 and 4 of this study. These are also interests of mine so they will be discussed from this perspective.
The first area of interest relates to Finding 3, student ability to access multiple and varied historical sources. I strongly believe in Bruner’s (1977, 1996) point of view that a student at any age can be taught more sophisticated concepts as long as the concepts are explained in a language students understand. Although Bruner’s work referenced age and not specific student populations, I think, it applied to students who need more content and skill support, in that students can be given more challenging and sophisticated historical sources if they are broken down in a more manageable way. For example, after completing and feeling energized by this research study, I gave students such a source and, with collaboration with the high school Reading teacher, we modified the source by breaking up the reading into sections, each containing prompts and questions for students to answer before moving on. Through class discussion and the review of student work, I found that students did demonstrate an understanding of this complex historical content.

Influenced by student understanding of the modified source, and continuing to work with students in my College Prep classes, I became interested in specifically researching to what extent different reading strategies, such as the one just mentioned, could impact student historical understanding of a variety of sources. After assessing the benefits of conducting an action research study, I would want to use this format again with students in my College Prep classes as a means to gain insights into the effectiveness of the different reading strategies used. This time, however, adding the Reading teacher as a second researcher-practitioner in this study would be beneficial. We had worked together many times, including co-teaching one of my College Prep classes that contained many of her reading students. The Reading teacher’s participation not only in the creation of different reading lessons and strategies, but as a second interviewer of our shared students, could help alleviate some of the time constraints that existed during this research
study. The Reading teacher could also add a reading-centric perspective to the interview questions and also be part of the data analysis process.

Referencing Bruner’s (1977, 1996) idea that teachers need to give students an opportunity to grapple with complex information, discuss it, negotiate their own thinking in terms of others, and consider the multiple perspectives that one may take towards the topic of study, I am also interested in further exploring Finding 4 and how students in the College Prep classes develop higher-order thinking skills. As mentioned during the discussion for that finding in Chapter 4, Finding 4 emerged from an element of curiosity during the coding process and from personal teaching experience. Therefore, it would be beneficial, through action research and student voice, to research the effectiveness of different strategies used to help students approach tasks that require higher-order thinking skills. Conducting this research with a special educator would be helpful in brainstorming different strategies to help students approach such tasks and to work collaboratively with data collection and analysis of the effectiveness of these strategies.

In addition to these two research interests, future studies aligning the effectiveness of specific History teaching strategies to specific learning styles could aid History educators in their use of instructional language, the development of activities, and the teaching of historical thinking skills. As was mentioned several times throughout the discussion of findings, students differed in their learning styles and as a result, had different views on how language, scaffolding, activities, and resources influenced their historical understanding. Therefore, it would be beneficial to understand how specific teaching strategies could help students with various learning styles access and demonstrate their understanding of the past.
Furthermore, there were many studies discussed in the literature review that collected data on student historical thinking concepts such as *historical empathy, historical significance,* and *time and sequence.* The literature however, did not specifically use students who need more content and skill support as research participants. Conducting studies regarding these historical concepts with feedback from this population of students would add to the current literature on student historical understanding.

Finally, although the topic of academic tracking was beyond the scope of this research study, the literature review provided an interesting jumping off point for further research on this topic due to the practice of leveling at our high school. Having taught many students who enjoyed the College Prep learning environment, it has been my experience that some students were not comfortable with being placed in this level due to the stigma associated with it. I had personally reprimanded students in Advanced College Prep and Honors classes for their inaccurate opinions about College Prep classes and the students enrolled in them. (Such opinions include that the College Prep classes are too easy and that students in these classes are not smart). Consequently, although some students would benefit from another year of content and skill support provided by College Prep History classes, they chose to change levels the following academic year. Due to these experiences, researching student perspectives about leveling, either solely within the freshmen College Prep World History classes or across all freshmen history class levels, would inform current discussions held by our Social Studies department and our high school faculty about the continued use of the practice.

**Conclusion**

As mentioned in the discussion of Jerome Bruner’s (1977, 1996) work throughout this study, I believe that students, regardless of ability, are capable of learning more complex
concepts when given the opportunity. In expanding upon my current teaching experience, this research study was a first step towards gaining a better understanding of how students in a College Prep World History class, who need more content and skill support, explain their understanding of the past through the use of historical evidence. Not only has this study provided something new to the current literature on History education; due to student participation and their constructive feedback, it gave this often stigmatized population a voice, and it provided a new lens to examine my own practice and how it impacted student historical understanding. Finally, this study has set the foundation for future research that can shed more light on how students, who need more content and skill support, understand the past and what efforts can be made to improve upon that understanding.
References


Stoskopf, A., & Bermudez, A. (Received from Alan Stoskopf, December, 2011). Rubric:

*Evidence- Critical Interrogation of a Source*
Stoskopf, A., Bermudez, A., & Hartman, U. (Received from Alan Stoskopf, December, 2011).

Rubric: Number and variety of sources used to formulate an explanation.

Stoskopf, A., Bermudez, A., & Hartman, U. (Received from Alan Stoskopf, December, 2011).

Rubric: Relationships established between different historical sources.

Stoskopf, A., Bermudez, A., & Hartman, U. (Received from Alan Stoskopf, December, 2011).

Rubric: Critical Interrogation of historical sources and interpretation of their perspective and meaning in context.


## Appendix A: Rubrics: Use of Historical Sources to Formulate Explanations

Created by: Alan Stoskopf, Angela Bermudez, and Ulrike Hartman

### 1- Number and variety of sources used to formulate an explanation.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Student does not use any sources.</td>
<td>Level 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Student uses one source (e.g., a newspaper article).</td>
<td>Level 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Student uses two sources but of a similar type (e.g., two newspaper articles from two different newspapers).</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Student uses two sources of different types (e.g., newspaper article and diary excerpt).</td>
<td>Level 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Student uses more than two different types of sources (e.g., newspaper, diary, government report, and poster).</td>
<td>Level 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2 - Relationships established between different historical sources

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Student does not establish relationships between sources (Either because he/she only uses one source or because student uses more but does not connect them in the explanation).</td>
<td>Level 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Student makes a relationship between two or more sources only if they have similar viewpoints (agree).</td>
<td>Level 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Student notices contradictory viewpoints between sources but dismisses one of them. Student does not understand why there are contradictions, and is not able to use the contradictions as part of her/his explanation.</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| d) Student relates sources in any of the following ways:  
  - Integrates sources of different types so they complement each other in forming an explanation.  
  - Notices contradictory viewpoints between sources and explain those differences based on the type of document under examination. Able to use these contradictions to formulate her/his own explanation. | Level 3 |
### 3 - Critical Interrogation of historical sources and interpretation of their perspective and meaning in context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td><strong>Paraphrasing</strong>: Student only paraphrases or summarizes the content, without mentioning author, intended audience, purpose, or context of the source. Does not look for deeper meaning. Implied assumption: what the source says is true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Plausible Statement</strong>: Student makes a plausible statement that comes from a closer reading but with no justification for this interpretation. Student mentions the name of the author without elaborating on why that is important. Does not mention intended audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Awareness of perspective</strong>: Student notices perspective of source but expresses caution. Student considers this a problem (the source is not very trustworthy). Mentions the author(s), and relates the author(s) to the perspective of the source but in a stereotypical way. Does not consider audience or purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>Active interpretation</strong>: Student notices perspective of a source, explains it as a function of its author, intended audience, and/or context. They use the perspective as valuable information to formulate an explanation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>Reflective about his/her interpretation</strong>: Student reflects about the plausibility of his/her interpretation. They compare their interpretation with other possible interpretations, tries to argue for its value. Interpretations are open to further discussion and revision of their ideas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter and Informed Student and Parent Consent Form

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: November 22, 2011   IRB #: 11-10-09
Principal Investigator(s): Alan Stokofp
                          Andrea Robbat Plasko
Department: Doctor of Education Program
          College of Professional Studies
Address: 42 Belvidere
         Northeastern University
Title of Project: Understanding and Teaching the Past to Students with Disabilities: A Qualitative Action Research Design
Participating Sites: Wellesley High School – permission letter received
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #5, #6, #7
                       Exempt #2 – pertains to classroom observation
Informed Consents: One (1) signed parental consent form with signed child assent

This project is approved under 45CFR46.404 which applies to children as research subjects and involves research not involving greater than minimal risk. Adequate provisions are made for soliciting the assent of the children and the permission of their parents or guardians, as set forth in 45CFR46.408.

Monitoring Interval: 12 months
APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: NOVEMBER 21, 2012

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Andrea Plasko and as you know I teach your child in the College Prep World History class at Wellesley High School. In addition to being a teacher, I am also currently a doctoral student at Northeastern University pursuing a degree in Curriculum Leadership. This letter and the additional forms included are to inform you of my doctoral research and to invite your child to participate in my research study regarding how students with and without learning disabilities understand the past through the use of historical evidence. More information regarding my research design and your child’s involvement are described in the Informed Consent Documents included with this letter.

Your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary and if they and/or you should choose not to participate, this decision will have no effect on their standing in class or the high school, or their relationship with me. Even if your child initially decides to participate they can opt out of the study at any time.

If you agree to allow your child to participate please check the “opt in” box and have both you and your child sign one of the Informed Consent Documents and return it to me in the pre-paid self-addressed stamped envelope by

---

If you do not want your child to participate, please check the “opt out” box, sign the enclosed form and return it to me.

The Principal Dr. Andrew Keough, Special Education Chair Debra Levine, and Social Studies Chair Michael Reidy are aware of my research and support the study. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions and I do hope that your child will participate.

Thank-you,

Andrea Plasko
781-446-6290 ext. 5329
robbat.a@husky.neu.edu
PLEASE SIGN AND RETURN THIS COPY TO THE RESEARCHER

Signed Parent/Guardian Informed Consent and Child Assent Document

Northeastern University, Department of Education, College of Professional Studies
Investigator Name: Andrea Robbat Plasko, student researcher; Dr. Alan Stokopf, Principal Investigator
Title of Project: Understand and Teaching the Past to Students with Learning Disabilities: A Qualitative Action Research Design

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
I am inviting your child to participate in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but I, as the researcher will explain it to your child first in class. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me. Your child does not have to participate if he/she does not want to.

If you agree to allow your child to participate please check the “opt in” box on page 2 and have both you and your child sign this consent form and return it to me in the pre-paid self-addressed stamped envelope.

If you do not want your child to participate, please check the “opt out” box on page 2, sign this form and return it to me.

Why is my child being asked to take part in this research study?
I am inviting your child to participate in this study because they are enrolled in my College Prep World History class.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research study is to learn how students with and without learning disabilities understand the past through the use of historical evidence.

What will my child be asked to do?
Your child will be asked to participate in no more than two individual interviews and no more than two focus group interviews. These interviews will be audio taped for transcription and analysis purposes only. If your child has an Individualized Education Plan, this record will be accessed as part of my research to draw connections between the data I have collected and learning disabilities. This document along with all data collected will be de-identified as I will be accessing them for research purposes only. Prior to each interview I will remind your child that they can opt out of the study at any time and that their decision to do so will have no effect on their standing in class or the high school, or their relationship with me.

Where will the study take place and how much of my child’s time will it take?
The study will take place at Wellesley High School over a period of approximately six weeks in our World History classroom. Both the individual and focus group interviews will take place outside of class and will be conducted either during Block 1 (7:30-8:30) of school, after school, during directed research periods, during the period when they are in Learning Center with permission from their special education teacher, or during a scheduled time during the school day that does not interfere with their classes. The interviews and focus groups will always take place in my classroom and will last approximately 15 minutes each.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to my child?
I will be asking your child to discuss their understanding of the history we are studying based on different activities they participate in and the language that I use in directions and questions. For students that are on Individualized Education Plans, I will not ask your child to specifically talk about their learning disability. If your child would like to offer this information, he/she may do so voluntarily. It is possible that during group interviews your child may volunteer this information in front of other students. To reduce this risk, I will not ask students who are on Individual Education Plans to talk about their disabilities. I will also do my utmost to make sure students are comfortable during the interview process and redirect conversations if they do feel uncomfortable.

APPROVED
NU 11/24/14
VALID THRU 11/3/15
**PLEASE SIGN AND RETURN THIS COPY TO THE RESEARCHER**

To protect your child’s anonymity and confidentiality, his/her name will be removed from all records and will be replaced with a letter. The information I use will be de-identified and remain confidential as well. I also will avoid describing your child’s feedback in such a way that could reveal their identity, even with this lettering system.

**Will my child benefit by being in this research?**

There is no direct benefit for your child to participate however, it is hoped that your child’s comments and feedback will inform teacher practices in regards to how students with and without learning disabilities understand the past through the use of historical evidence. I also hope that your child will enjoy taking part in the research process.

**Who will see the information about my child?**

Your child’s part in this study will be confidential. No reports or publications will identify your child or Wellesley High School in any way. I will keep all of the data, both written and audio taped at my home so that it is not available to other students and teachers. I will destroy the data after three years and all audio taped interviews will be destroyed once they are transcribed and analyzed.

**If I do not want my child to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

Your child’s participation in this research is completely voluntary. Your child does not have to participate if they do not want to and they can refuse to answer any question. Even if your child begins the study, either you or he/she may withdraw from it any time. If your child chooses not to participate or should they decide to withdraw from the study, this decision will have no affect on their standing in class or the high school, or their relationship with me.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this research study you can contact me via email at robbat.a@husky.neu.edu or by phone at 781-446-6290 ext. 5329. You can also contact Dr. Alan Stoskopf, the principal investigator overseeing my research at A.Stoskopf@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my child’s rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will my child be paid for participating?**

Your child will not be paid for your participation.

[ ] **OPT IN:** I agree to have my child take part in this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of parent/guardian</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Printed name of parent/guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature of child</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Printed name of child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[ ] **OPT OUT:** I do NOT want my child to take part in this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of parent/guardian</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Printed name of parent/guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of Child:</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Signed Parent/Guardian Informed Consent and Child Assent Document

Northeastern University, Department of Education, College of Professional Studies
Investigator Name: Andrea Robbat Plasko, student researcher; Dr. Alan Stoskopf, Principal Investigator
Title of Project: Understand and Teaching the Past to Students with Learning Disabilities: A Qualitative Action Research Design

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
I am inviting your child to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but I, as the researcher, will explain it to your child first in class. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Your child does not have to participate if he/she does not want to.

If you agree to allow your child to participate please check the “opt in” box on page 2 and have both you and your child sign this consent form and return it to me in the pre-paid self-addressed stamped envelope.

If you do not want your child to participate, please check the “opt out” box on page 2, sign this form and return it to me.

Why is my child being asked to take part in this research study?
I am asking your child to participate in this study because they are enrolled in my College Prep World History class.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research study is to learn how students with and without learning disabilities understand the past through the use of historical evidence.

What will my child be asked to do?
Your child will be asked to participate in no more than two individual interviews and no more than two focus group interviews. These interviews will be audio taped for transcription and analysis purposes only. If your child has an Individualized Education Plan, this record will be accessed as part of my research to draw connections between the data I have collected and learning disabilities. This document along with all data collected will be de-identified as I will be accessing them for research purposes only. Prior to each interview I will remind your child that they can opt out of the study at any time and that their decision to do so will have no effect on their standing in class or the high school, or their relationship with me.

Where will the study take place and how much of my child’s time will it take?
The study will take place at Wellesley High School over a period of approximately six weeks in our World History classroom. Both the individual and focus group interviews will take place outside of class and will be conducted either during Block 1 (7:30-8:30) of school, after school, during directed research periods, during the period when they are in Learning Center with permission from their special education teacher, or during a scheduled time during the school day that does not interfere with their classes. The interviews and focus groups will always take place in my classroom and will last approximately 15 minutes each.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to my child?
I will be asking your child to discuss their understanding of the history we are studying based on different activities they participate in and the language that I use in directions and questions. For students that are on Individualized Education Plans, I will not ask your child to specifically talk about their learning disability. If your child would like to offer this information, he/she may do so voluntarily. It is possible that during group interviews your child may volunteer this information in front of other students. To reduce this risk, I will not ask students who are on Individual Education Plans to talk about their disabilities. I will also do my utmost to make sure students are comfortable during the interview process and redirect conversations if they do feel uncomfortable.

APPROVED
NU IRB 11-0-69
VALID: 11/3/11
THROUGH: 11/24/13
To protect your child's anonymity and confidentiality, his/her name will be removed from all records and will be replaced with a letter. The information I use will be de-identified and remain confidential as well. I also will avoid describing your child's feedback in such a way that could reveal their identity, even with this lettering system.

**Will my child benefit by being in this research?**

There is no direct benefit for your child to participate however, it is hoped that your child's comments and feedback will inform teacher practices in regards to how students with and without learning disabilities understand the past through the use of historical evidence. I also hope that your child will enjoy taking part in the research process.

**Who will see the information about my child?**

Your child's part in this study will be confidential. No reports or publications will identify your child or Wellesley High School in any way. I will keep all of the data, both written and audio taped at my home so that it is not available to other students and teachers. I will destroy the data after three years and all audio taped interviews will be destroyed once they are transcribed and analyzed.

**If I do not want my child to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

Your child's participation in this research is completely voluntary. Your child does not have to participate if they do not want to and they can refuse to answer any question. Even if your child begins the study, either you or he/she may withdraw from it at any time. If your child chooses not to participate or should they decide to withdraw from the study, this decision will have no affect on their standing in class or the high school, or their relationship with me.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this research study you can contact me via email at robbat.a@husky.neu.edu or by phone at 781-446-6290 ext. 5329. You can also contact Dr. Alan Stoskopf, the principal investigator overseeing my research at A.Stoskopf@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my child's rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: trb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will my child be paid for participating?**

Your child will not be paid for your participation.

☐ **OPT IN: I agree to have my child take part in this research.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of parent/guardian</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Printed name of parent/guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of child</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Printed name of child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

☐ **OPT OUT: I do NOT want my child to take part in this research.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of parent/guardian</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Printed name of parent/guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Name of Child: ____________________________

APPROVED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NRRB</th>
<th>11/24/04</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>11/24/04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through</td>
<td>11/31/04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Activity 3: Buy My Dynasty

The Task:
In groups students will work together to create a wiki page ad campaign to sell their dynasty to their “customers” (the rest of the class and most importantly the only “paying customer” ME!). In this assignment, groups will present their ads to the class and create a worksheet for their classmates to complete.

Procedures
1. The first “rule” of advertisement is to know your “product”. Since the product is your dynasty, you need to thoroughly research it and address the “key considerations” listed under your dynasty- you will use this research to answer the unit question and frame your ad. Divide up the research responsibilities to work on this most effectively. Everyone needs to take notes on all information that your team has found. This will help you to decide on a “product message”.

2. Decide on your “slogan” and “product message”. Your “slogan” will be short and catchy – think of ads today and how they draw you in. Your “product message” will be the single idea you want your “customer” to take away about your “product” (dynasty) once they view your ad. You can consider this your answer to the unit question associated with your dynasty. Tip: Think of this as a competition for the best dynasty and you are trying to convince me that yours is the best.

3. Now it’s time to be creative. As a group brainstorm ideas of advertisements you personally have found effective, entertaining, and interesting. Be open to all suggestions and think of ways to add or build on them. Each member must contribute to this stage to earn full credit. Refer to the hand out Ten Rules for More Effective Advertising for some guidance.

Note: In addition to text, your wiki page should be visually pleasing and therefore you should consider using images, logos, etc. to catch and keep the viewer’s attention.

4. Begin working on your wiki page. My suggestion is to divide up responsibilities. Ex: 1-2 people work on the wiki page and 2) someone else works on the worksheet (described in #5). Remember: Look back at your “product message”/ your answer to the unit question to frame the ad and share your information. Important: The tone of your wiki page should be one of an advertisement. Remember you want me to “buy your product”.

5. The Worksheet should contain: a) group members names b) name of your dynasty and years of reign, c) the “product message” underlined in a clear statement, c) maximum of 8 questions that reflect your product message and relate to your “key considerations” . This will ultimately help your classmates’ answer the unit question once they fill out your worksheet. Make sure the questions are clear. The unit question is the final question on your worksheet.

6. You should have a bibliography at the end of your wiki page. We will talk more about this but look at your Writing Hand Book on pg. 22-23.
Information/Timeframe:
♦ Your research will be done both inside and outside of class. Some materials I will provide but you also need to use the online database ABC-Clio.
♦ Each member will be responsible for researching information about the key considerations.
♦ You will have approximately 4-5 class periods to work on this. You must work diligently and come prepared each day.
♦ You can find the link to your wiki page on my page. Go to the Unit 7 link and then the College Prep link.

Dynasty Unit Questions and Key Considerations:

**Sui:** How did the achievements of the Sui dynasty contribute to the success of future dynasties?

*Key considerations:*
♦ Success in reuniting China
♦ The Grand Canal
♦ Examination system

**Tang:** How did China sustain their political and cultural expansion during the Tang dynasty?

*Key considerations:*
♦ Revival of Silk Road
♦ Empress Wu
♦ Benefits of Grand Canal
♦ Examination System

*See pgs. 287-288 in your text*

**Song:** What were the results of Song China’s extensive urbanization and commercial expansions between the 10th and 13th century?

*Key considerations:*
♦ Taxation forces migration to the cities
♦ Lines of credit, currency, beginning of banking
♦ Printing press, magnetic compass, gun powder
♦ Transportation and communication-highway system, postal system, naval fleet

See pgs 288-290 in text

**Ming:** Why did the Ming Dynasty, despite growth, focus on recovering the past rather than pioneering the future?

*Key considerations:*
♦ Zeng He and exploration
♦ Rise of Beijing and the Forbidden City
♦ Heightened ethnocentrism
♦ Role of Confucianism
Appendix D: Activity 6: Charlemagne Primary Source Organizer and Body Paragraph

**Directions:** With a partner read, mark-up, and annotate the two primary source accounts about Charlemagne. As you read fill out the document information and the chart. Make sure you read the introduction provided for each primary source. It will give you background information about the document. When you’re done filling in both charts, individually and on lined paper answer the question about Charlemagne. I will be collecting your readings, your completed chart, and your paragraph.

**Document Information**

*Title of Source:* _______________________________________________________

*Author and Background (if known):*
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________

*Document Type (letter, telegram, legal document, biography, etc.):*
________________________________________________________

*Time Period of Document: * __________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Einhardt’s Account</strong> (Record his description of events)</th>
<th><strong>Evidence of Author Bias</strong> (Quote specific evidence from the text that you think demonstrates Einhardt is bias or impartial (unbiased). Explain your rationale.)</th>
<th><strong>Question(s) you have about the document</strong> (These can be about use of language, the time period, challenging the author’s assumptions etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Document Information

**Title of Source:**

**Author and Background (if known):**

**Document Type (letter, telegram, legal document, biography, etc.):**

**Time Period of Document:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Einhardt’s Account</strong> (Record his description of events)</th>
<th><strong>Evidence of Author Bias</strong> (Quote specific evidence from the text that you think demonstrates Einhardt is bias or impartial (unbiased). Explain your rationale.)</th>
<th><strong>Question(s) you have about the document</strong> (These can be about use of language, the time period, challenging the author’s assumptions etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Directions: Based on the two primary source charts you filled in on Einhardt’s account of Charlemagne, use historical evidence to answer the following question: Did Charlemagne deserve to be given the title “Charlemagne the Great”? Write your paragraph on lined paper. Your paragraph should include:

- Topic sentence
- Historical Evidence from the two primary sources – you can use quotes if you want
- Analysis
- Transitions
- Concluding sentence

**Do not use “I” in your paragraph.**