INTRODUCTION/RATIONALE

In my personal life I have often heard young people describe history as “boring,” which is a shame since I absolutely love history! But I understand where they are coming from, often history classes can feel irrelevant to students today. I want to make my classroom as engaging as possible so that students can connect with the material and make meaningful connections to their personal lives. Additionally, primary sources often reveal experiences or perspectives of people who are otherwise ignored by broader historical narratives and textbooks.

In my student teaching I utilized primary sources quite frequently and usually found success with them. These activities often engaged the students, and I noticed that they had remembered more of the engagement or took better notes from the lessons. However, sometimes the sources were difficult for the students to read or comprehend, usually due to unfamiliar vocabulary. I wanted to learn both if primary source activities can increase student engagement and how to best implement them to achieve this goal and avoid frustration.

For this inquiry project, primary sources will refer to firsthand accounts, historical events from someone who was directly connected to it. Student engagement will refer to a student’s interest in the educational material to participate and learn, and on-task behavior in class.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Student engagement can help predict academic outcomes as well as likelihood of substance use and delinquency (Wang & Degol, 2014).
- Students are more engaged when tasks challenge them. This can help avoid the problem of disengagement (Wang & Degol, 2014).
- There is no evidence that traditional ‘textbook & lecture’ instructional methods engage students, especially in lower achieving students (Malkmus, 2010).
- Primary sources are an excellent way to support student inquiry. Students must use their existing knowledge of the content to make sense of primary documents. Students develop questions about the document and seek other sources for answers. This facilitates the growth of their critical thinking and analysis skills (Morgan & Rashinski, 2012). These skills are valuable beyond the classroom, for example in analyzing media and news with a critical lens.
- The National Council for the Social Studies’ Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework also highlights the importance of inquiry in engagement, stating that students can become disengaged when content consists solely of textbook work and multiple-choice tests. They promote engagement through the Inquiry Arc, a four-stage framework that emphasizes the development of questions, gathering and analysis of sources, and formation of conclusions. Primary source analysis fits perfectly into the third dimension, in which students must evaluate sources and develop claims based on the evidence. Thus, primary sources are not only useful for engaging students, but for preparing them for their futures as adults (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).

DO PRIMARY SOURCES INCREASE ENGAGEMENT?

Fostering student engagement is not just about whether students like their classes or not, it has a major impact on their academic and personal lives. Students who are engaged in school content show better grades, are more likely to complete school, are less likely to engage in substance use or delinquency and are more likely to pursue higher education (Wang & Degol, 2014).

Many historians and educators think an inquiry-based approach using primary sources is a good way to increase engagement. Primary sources can "stimulate curiosity, provoke questions, and supply evidence for historical accounts" (Morgan & Rashinski, 2012, p. 59). Furthermore, reading a primary document gives students a much better understanding of how historical events impacted people’s lives, and helps students to feel more connected to the past. All of these can potentially spark interest in social studies, but do primary sources actually increase engagement?

There are surprisingly few studies testing the impact of primary sources on student engagement. Of the five studies I found, most have relatively small sample sizes ranging from 20 to 200 participants. The majority of these studies support the assertion that primary sources do increase engagement. All but one study found a strong correlation between primary source activities and student engagement (Gore, 2017). There were also several other benefits resulting from the use of primary sources. Students were completing more homework or being able to recall information more readily (Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011). It seems primary sources do generally enhance engagement, but research is still ongoing. Without providing their students adequate contextual information for the source, they may become frustrated and disengaged (Barton, 2005). Providing this support for the use of primary sources for student engagement:

Figure 1. Reading Packets Were More Interesting than Textbooks

In this graph “Reading Packets” are a collection of primary documents used instead of a textbook (Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011).