

TO BE, RATHER THAN TO SEEM: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE
IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY IN THE 9-12 CURRICULUM

by

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Abstract: There has been a recent emphasis on Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) education, an area that seems to be growing even when budget cuts hit. The present study investigates whether high school students perceive history to be as important as science and math. To test the value placed on each subject based on the reasons informed by the literature, a survey was administered to a purposive sample of eleventh grade students in a public high school in a rural county in eastern North Carolina. For history or social studies, math, science, and English or language arts, respondents rated their agreement with and participants discussed in focus groups whether the subject engaged them and was important for them to contribute to society, achieve financial success, or reach their future goals. Responses were compared by subject and themes were highlighted. While respondents gave high scores to all the subjects, the remarks of the focus group participants showed their unique ideas for engagement through cooperative learning and games. Participants also expressed the belief that subjects were most important when the material clearly related to their futures.

Keywords: history, history education, history teaching, social studies teaching, social studies education, student apathy, student engagement

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends and emphases in education have led districts and funders to focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education, leaving humanities underfunded and underappreciated. This has been evident in all districts, but anecdotally has been seen in some rural districts of poverty. The summer STEM program is designed with no component of history included and the only English component involves students creating a cover letter and resume. Also, when budget cuts hit the state universities, some departments are faced with difficult decisions to make up for the discrepancy. For example, one local news station, WITN, covered North Carolina's expected budget cuts and their effects on the English department at East Carolina University. Planning ahead, the English department would not offer as many courses or sections as previous years, and they would not renew some faculty members' contracts (Ramey & DiPietro, 2015). The present study explores actual students' perceptions of the importance of different subjects, especially history.

Roy Rosenzweig (1998) discussed a widespread idea of the uninformed public on matters of history. He displayed this through examples of historians' views on the lack of engagement with history and popular commentators' views on society's disinterest in the subject. Rosenzweig then tested which activities Americans had participated in and how connected they felt to the past through several different options, such as gathering with family, visiting a historic site, or celebrating a holiday. This research showed how much Americans feel connected to the past and in what ways they connect best. Similarly, the History Relevance Campaign (2013) attempted to display the importance of studying the past in today's society. They sought to convince the population of history's importance to ourselves, our communities, and our future.

Rosenzweig and the History Relevance Campaign have helped inspire and inform the present research on this topic.

In the present study, history is compared to the other core subjects of math, science, and English to see if there is any difference in the importance assigned to each by students. The research tests if students truly find the discipline interesting and advantageous to their contribution to society, financial futures, or life goals. Then, some of the best practices as perceived by students for teachers to engage them with history and convince them of its relevance are discussed.

The primary research question guiding the present study is: What are students' perceptions of the importance of history and social studies and how does it compare to other subjects? Then, the secondary research question is: What teaching practices do students perceive as being most effective or engaging in learning history or social studies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

While attempting to confront ideas about students' perceptions of the importance of history, it was necessary to further break this topic down to find relevant literature. First, research on the existence of apathy was located. Finding little directly relating to history, the literature focuses on student apathy in general. Next, studies on how history is taught initiated an exploration of a potential connection between apathy and history. Studies about student apathy in general and the causes of that apathy, studies about the ways history is taught, and studies about why history could be connected to apathy helped plan the direction for the study.

Student Apathy

In Raffini's (1986) study of student apathy, he discovered students often choose to fail in order to avoid a sense of failure. In other words, he found that once they had given up on

achieving above average success, students simply quit trying out of fear of their true work being labeled “below average.” Also, Raffini proposed that competition in the classroom among peers, with the lack of a level playing field and unequitable chances for academic success, contributed to student apathy. Bishop (1989) found that competition in most schools creates a zero-sum situation. As some students succeed, others are prevented from receiving the limited awards available. Thus, he found that students cared more and worked harder in a cooperative environment. In the same way, Knight’s (2008) study of the participation of African American females in an Advanced Placement United States Government class also displayed the barriers created by competition. Although her study was not testing apathy, she did find that her students charged the competitive environment of the class with discouraging them from speaking up or sharing their thoughts.

Bishop (1989) also noted the lack of a reward in wages for students that perform well in high school. He pointed out how there seems to be no reason to put in extra effort if the results will be unaffected in internship opportunities, after-school employment, and future wages. Bishop highlighted how most parents only stress the importance of obtaining a diploma instead of high performance in school, further contributing to students’ apathy.

For the 220 high school participants in their study, Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, and Akey (2004) found that a primary motivational factor was future benefits. Greene et al. found students were more engaged by tasks they deemed meaningful and relevant to their future plans, identity, and success. Therefore, students need a cooperative environment and a clear promise of a future pay-off to be motivated in school.

How History is Taught

King (1993) noted how most classes are heavily based in lecture which also inhibits a student's ability to form their own conclusions. She pointed out that group collaboration and activities like Think-Pair-Share encourage students to work with their peers to find meaning. Since each group member is responsible for a contribution to the group in this process, each student will be actively learning. Similarly, Carretero, Jacott, and López-Manjón (2002) based their study on the idea that textbooks represented the different points of view in a classroom. They pointed out that textbooks often present the "official" version of history, or the version that is supposed to be taught. If students willingly accept this version of history, there is not much room for their active interpretation or collaboration with peers.

The idea of active learning instead of traditional lecture is displayed in McCarthy and Anderson's (2000) study of introductory history and political science classes. They had control group classes using only lectures and several experimental classes using active role playing. McCarthy and Anderson found that the students engaged in the active learning classrooms scored higher on an exam featuring an essay question, with the results of the history classes more statistically significant than those of the political science classes. They attributed this success to the preparation necessary from each student for the role-playing activities and the willing participation of the group members in the activities. These studies support the idea that students respond better to collaborative learning exercises as opposed to lectures they may be asked to regurgitate.

However, Barton and Levstik (2003) found that history teachers focus their time on controlling student behavior and covering all the content. They pointed out how the most useful activities such as collaboration or role-playing could cause disruptions in the classroom so it

seems easier to evade that risk by avoiding those activities. Also, offering multiple viewpoints or asking students to analyze a source could diminish the amount of content a teacher is capable of presenting, which leads them to avoid those approaches. Therefore, Barton and Levstik concluded that teachers must believe it is their duty to prepare students to participate in democracy. Students will need skills in interpretation to effectively participate.

Relating to the focus on the amount of content taught, Hall (2004) reviewed the trends in history test scores. Along the way, she pointed out that while adults classify history as the most boring subject, it is not really history that is boring but the teaching of history. Hall noted a pressure to “teach to the test” that plagued history classrooms, leaving a void of analysis of primary sources, presentations of multiple viewpoints, and the development of arguments. After all, these multiple choice tests ask students to recall and regurgitate what they learned in lectures or textbooks. This form of testing robs students of skills of interpretation they will need in their future. If teachers keep the goal of preparing students for democracy in mind and show their students how historical interpretation can benefit them in their futures, students may be more motivated in their history classes.

Further Connections on Why History is Called “Boring”

Other reasons history may be considered “boring” could be its differences with other subjects. For example, Turk, Klein, and Dickstein (2007) found that fiction allows students to relate to the material in a unique way. Traditionally, fiction may have been limited to an English or language arts class. However, Turk et al. advocated for including fiction in the history classroom to build up students’ literacy skills, transform them into lifelong learners, and clarify the narrative of history. Much the same way, Kaiser (2010) promoted an alternative approach to history that involves more action. His idea helped him gain the interest of a student who

considered himself a “math and science guy.” Kaiser asked his students to choose a historical perspective, such as aviation, and determine the turning points and mega years in history. This transforms history into an action on the part of students instead of something they acquire passively.

Rosenzweig (1998), using a mixed methods approach, quantitatively tested how connected Americans felt to history through different activities and qualitatively further questioned his participants to explain why. He found that respondents felt least connected to history when they were exposed to it in classrooms. Additionally, Rosenzweig found that the most common word used to describe history in schools was “boring.” Then, he pointed out how it would be interesting to discover how students felt about history compared to other school subjects. Ultimately, I hope to carry out this idea in my research to observe whether students found history more boring than other subjects and use qualitative research to explain any trends in the data.

In the telephone study of 808 participants with minority samples of 200 African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Sioux Indians, Rosenzweig (1998) also found the ways they felt most connected to history. Overwhelmingly, participants chose time with family as when they felt history mattered most, and thus, they selected family-oriented activities such as gatherings, museums or historic sites, and holidays as how they felt most connected. Also, Rosenzweig discovered while whites and Mexican Americans gave United States history the next highest importance, African Americans and Sioux Indians assigned the history of their race or ethnicity a higher importance than the country. Ultimately, Rosenzweig discovered the key to making the past usable is to relate it to students and make it personal. However, it would be impossible to cater a lesson to each student’s family or even ethnicity.

Drake and Brown (2003) suggested a method that could help address the problem of relating to all the diverse students in the classroom. Initially, the teacher picks one essential document, which becomes the First-order document. Then, Drake and Brown propose that the teacher presents three to five sources, classified as Second-order, that challenge or support the First-order document. Finally, students are allowed the opportunity to bring in their own primary sources, classified as Third-order, relating to the First-order document or choose from a list of suggestions made by the teacher. Drake and Brown's method allows each individual student to make history personal in their search for Third-order sources such as photographs, newspaper articles, and even music.

Engagement of Students

In the literature on how students were most engaged there was a theme of providing autonomy support in a moderately-structured, mastery goal-oriented classroom. Jang, Reeve, and Decci (2010) wanted to assess student engagement, in both observed behavior and students' perceptions of their own engagement. They first observed the teachers and rated their levels of autonomy support in considering students' needs and interests and providing challenges. Then they rated the levels of structure in each classroom. Next, Jang et al., with the help of graduate students, observed and surveyed 1,584 students in 133 public high schools in the Midwest. They found that both autonomy support and structure positively related with the objective observations of students' engagement through behavior, such as being on-task and putting forth effort. However, Jang et al. found that only autonomy support showed a strong positive relation with the subjective, self-reported engagement of students, suggesting that students most value a degree of choice and independence.

Additionally, Ames and Archer (1988), in their study of 176 junior high and high school students, wanted to investigate the relationship between mastery or performance goals and student motivation. They found that if students identified an emphasis on mastery, they were more likely to utilize effective learning strategies and enjoy challenging tasks. Emphasis on performance goals correlated with students judging their ability to be lower and the reason for their failure. On the other hand, mastery goals lessened the correlation effect of students' perceived self-ability with the amount of effort they put forth. In other words, Ames and Archer found that students in classes emphasizing mastery believed in a relationship between the amount of effort they put in and their success. Similarly, Ames (1992) researched how tasks, authority, and evaluation could positively relate to student interest, active engagement, acceptance of mistakes as chances to learn, and a feeling of belonging. She found that the most beneficial tasks were meaningful to students, challenged them, and encouraged goal-setting. Authority given to the students through encouraged participation, choices, and opportunities at self-management most often correlated with the desirable traits of engagement and interest. Furthermore, when evaluation was based on individual progress, recognition of effort, and opportunities to improve, students showed the qualities of accepting mistakes and feeling like they belonged. This is consistent with the theme of a cooperative environment rather than competitive with perceived winners and losers. Overall, the literature showed that student engagement correlates with a chance at autonomy, while keeping some structure especially in the form of mastery goal orientation and emphasis on effort and progress.

In conclusion, although students seem to be apathetic, the literature suggests that this lack of motivation is rooted in an unproductively competitive environment and a lack of perceived future benefits of doing well in school. Because history teachers have a tendency to spend most

of their time trying to cover content and keep order in their classrooms, students may miss out on the cooperative learning environment and essential critical-thinking skills. This absence may lead to student apathy in the history classroom. Also, when compared to other subjects, history may seem more passive and boring, further inhibiting student motivation. Furthermore, if students do not see history in school as relevant to their lives, they may further classify the subject as boring. However, if history is seen as a chance at autonomy in relevant tasks with a lessened fear of failure, students will feel more engaged with the subject. The literature helped guide the present study on the importance assigned to each subject by high school students in eastern North Carolina and the reasons behind their answers.

METHODOLOGY

The research questions guiding the present study were: (a) What are students' perceptions of the importance of history and social studies and how does it compare to other subjects? and (b) What teaching practices do students perceive as being the most effective or engaging in learning history or social studies? In order to address the primary and secondary research question, a mixed methods approach was utilized using surveys and focus groups. Rosenzweig (1998) designed his study similarly. He began with closed-ended questions that were quantifiable. On a ten-point scale, Rosenzweig asked participants to rate how connected they felt to the past on holidays, at family gatherings, in history class in schools, while reading history books, at museums or historical sites, and while watching historical films or television shows. He estimated these questions took up about a quarter of the interview. Then, Rosenzweig transitioned to open-ended qualitative questions for the remaining three-quarters of the interview. However, he completed both the closed-ended questions and the open-ended question in the same phone interviews, lasting about forty minutes each. Rosenzweig's study design provided

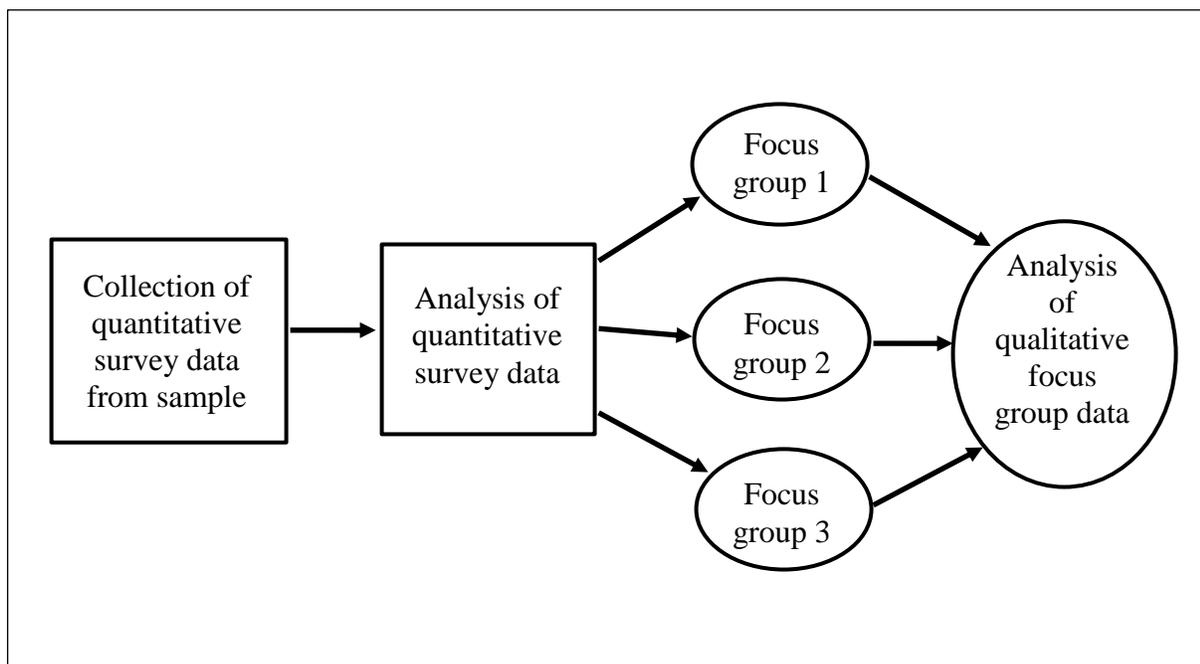
the best example for my research because he researched what people thought about history through surveys then why they thought it through the phone interviews. In the same way, the quantifiable information in surveys was collected on one day and then on a later date, focus group interviews were conducted (see Figure 1).

Method

For the survey (see Appendix A), quantitative data was retrieved on students' perceptions of history or social studies, math, science, and English or language arts. The design of the survey was similar to that of Ames and Archer (1988). They used a five-point Likert scale to assess varying degrees of agreement from *strongly disagree*, assigned a score of 1, to *strongly agree*, assigned a score of 5. Ames and Archer began each question with a reference to the particular class the students were enrolled in, which varied from English, math, science, and social studies. The same subjects were included and a five-point scale was utilized in the survey. However, in the present study's survey, each respondent was asked about each subject, while Ames and Archer depended on the subject in which the student was enrolled. The same four questions were incorporated about each subject, including the subject title in all caps to catch the respondent's attention and notify them to tailor their response to that specific subject. One question asked about engagement or interest in each subject. Another question asked whether respondents felt the subject was important in order to contribute to society. The next question prompted respondents to rate each subject regarding its importance for their economic, financial, or monetary success. The last question inquired whether or not the respondent believed each subject is important to their future because of its ability to help them achieve goals. These questions were grouped by the academic subject instead of by the topic to encourage respondents to focus on one subject at a time.

To elaborate on the data collected by the surveys, it was necessary to conduct a focus group interview (see Appendix B). Each question in the interview was patterned around the survey questions, creating four major questions. The first question asks generally for examples of the most engaging activities. Next, the researcher inquired about activities participants have experienced or suggestions they have for engaging activities in history. The researcher continued with that question by asking about math, science, and English. To introduce each of the remaining questions, the researcher began with the general questions about high school skills helping students contribute to society, achieve economic, financial, or monetary success, and reach their goals for the future. Then, the researcher inquired specifically about the question relating to history, math, science, and English.

Figure 1. Organization of the study design, data collection to data analysis.



Population and Sample

The population was eleventh grade history or social studies students. It was a purposive sample including participants enrolled in the Honors American History I classes at a rural high school in eastern North Carolina where the researcher was placed for the Senior I internship. The sample mirrors the demographics of the high school because about one-third of the participants were white, one-third were African American and one-third were Latino. Before the research was conducted, parental consent forms were sent home with students to obtain the permission of the parents or guardians of the minors as required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Students and parents were informed that their participation was voluntary and would have no effect on their academic standing. Also, they were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and private on the survey. Moreover, the parental consent form notified parents or guardians that their student would not have to answer a question if they felt uncomfortable with it and they could terminate their participation at any time. The incentive for student participation was a sense of agency from their voice being heard. Their input led to the suggestion of some of the best and most engaging teaching practices which will help future students.

Data Collection

The survey (see Appendix A) was administered online to ensure respondents would remain anonymous and would not feel pressured to participate. Since every student at the school had an iPad assigned to them and readily available, the survey questions were presented using the double-password-protected Qualtrics platform for the students' tablets. A consultation with the clinical teacher and research mentor determined the best medium to use for this survey, and the medium was approved by the IRB. The clinical teacher helped distribute the link to the

Qualtrics survey to those students who had returned a signed parental consent form. There were respondents from all three classes taught by the clinical teacher.

The focus group interviews (see Appendix B) consisted of survey respondents in three different groups, one from each class taught by the clinical teacher. Each group contained four participants in order to create a low-risk environment, encourage input, and allow time for each participant to voice their thoughts. The focus group discussions took roughly fifteen minutes. The focus groups were videotaped, as approved by the IRB and in the parental consent forms, so the researcher was able to transcribe what was said by each participant. Also, by using the combination of audio and video, the researcher had the opportunity to better notice the participants' body language and other nonverbal clues that may have been missed during the discussion. At the beginning of the session, participants were reminded about the basic rules of conversation such as only one person speaking at a time while the others listen. After a participant finished what they wanted to say, the researcher encouraged response and tried to prevent the domination of the discussion by one participant. Upon the conclusion of the focus group, the participants were thanked and the research goals were explained.

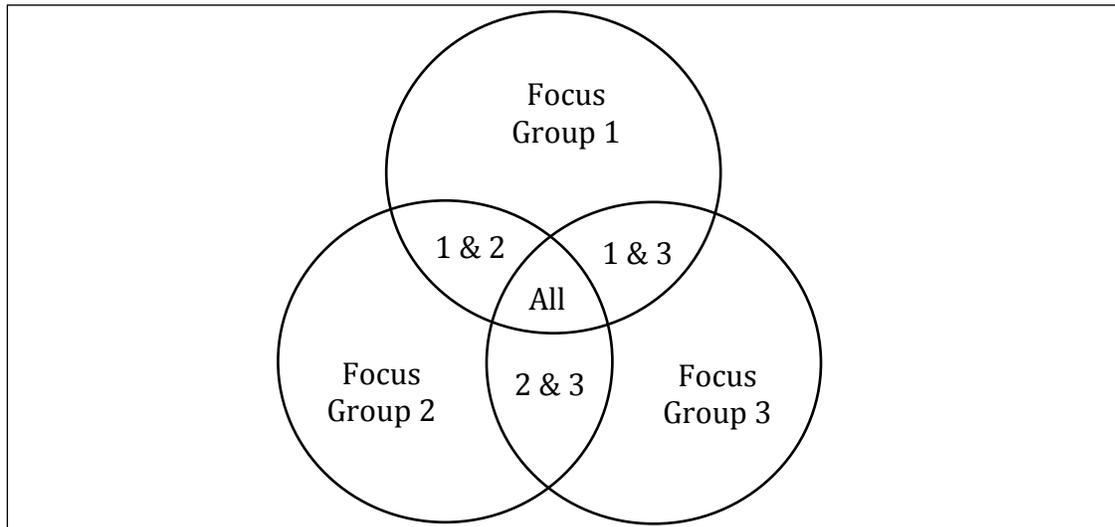
Data Analysis

After retrieving the data from the surveys (see Appendix A), a *mean score* for each subject was calculated as the average value. Scores were assigned to the different responses with "Strongly Disagree" having a score of 1, "Somewhat Disagree" equaled 2, "Neither Agree nor Disagree" equaled 3, "Somewhat Agree" equaled 4, and "Strongly Agree" equaled 5. One question at a time, the mean score was calculated by adding the scores given by the respondents and dividing it by the total number of respondents, thirty-one. Therefore, there was a mean score for history, math, science, and English for each topic of the questions. If many respondents

agreed with the question related to a certain subject, like history, there was a high mean score for that subject. If many respondents disagreed with the question, there would be a lower mean score for the subject. The first question's topic was summarized into the heading "Engaged/Interested." The second question was summarized as "Contribute to Society." The third was summarized to "Economic Success" and the fourth was summarized to "Achieve Future Goals." Also, an *agreement score* was administered based on the percentage of respondents that indicated positively that they agreed. This was calculated by adding the percentage of respondents that selected either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree." Therefore, responses of "Strongly Disagree," "Somewhat Disagree," and "Neither Agree nor Disagree" were not included in the agreement score so it does not differentiate between the low scores assigned. It also does not distinguish between the strong support and weaker support. However, the agreement score provided a glimpse of the positive reactions of the respondents to each question and each subject.

Following the focus groups (see Appendix B) and the transcripts of the student responses, the data were analyzed. Each focus group's responses were compared and contrasted with those of the other groups (see Figure 2). It was determined what themes came up in all three groups, what themes came up in two groups, and what themes were unique to a single group. This analysis was completed for each major question topic like engagement of interest in the subject and whether each subject will help students contribute to society, achieve financial success, and accomplish their goals for the future.

Figure 2. Comparison of qualitative focus group responses from each group for each question.



LIMITATIONS

This study faced many limitations, such as the sample of students available. While my clinical teacher has seventy-seven students total and all students took home a parental consent form, only thirty-three students brought it back signed and granting permission. Of the thirty-three, only thirty-one responded to the survey because of absences and lack of time on other days. Also, since all participants were in history classes and aware that the researcher was planning to be a history teacher, participants may have responded what they thought would please the researcher. Moreover, since all participants were enrolled in the honors level course, their responses may differ from those in standard courses. Conventional wisdom would suggest honors students may be more likely than others to indicate that they feel all subjects would interest them and help them contribute to society, achieve financial success and future goals.

RESULTS

How does social studies compare to other subjects?

Using the mean and agreement score, the researcher compared the respondents' perceptions of history or social studies, math, science, and English or language arts (see Table 1).

Table 1. Survey data results for mean score and agreement score.

	<u>Engaged/Interested</u>		<u>Contribute to Society</u>		<u>Economic Success</u>		<u>Achieve Future Goals</u>	
	<i>mean</i>	<i>% agree</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>% agree</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>% agree</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>% agree</i>
HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES	3.65	74.19%	4.03	80.64%	4.03	80.64%	3.61	61.29%
MATH	3.35	54.84%	3.97	80.64%	4.42	90.32%	4	70.97%
SCIENCE	3.81	70.97%	3.87	67.74%	3.13	45.17%	3.52	51.61%
ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS	4	74.19%	4.52	93.34%	4.35	80.64%	4.45	77.42%

When students were asked about feeling “Engaged/Interested,” history was ranked third (see Figure 3) with a mean score of 3.65. English was the highest (4), followed by science (3.81), with math (3.35) ranked the lowest. For the agreement score (see Figure 4), history and English shared first rank with 74.19%, followed by science (70.97%) with math (54.84%) the lowest.

When asked whether each subject could help them “Contribute to Society,” respondents ranked history second with the mean score of 4.03, followed closely by math (3.97) and science (3.87). The first rank went to English with the highest mean score of 4.52. English also took the first in agreement score with 93.34%, followed by history and math tying at 80.64%. The lowest in agreement score was science (67.74%).

On the topic of subjects leading to “Economic Success,” history had the third highest mean score with 4.03. Math (4.42) had the highest mean score with English (4.35) close behind and still well above 4. Science had the lowest mean score (3.13) and the lowest agreement score (45.17%). Math had the highest agreement score of 90.32%. English and history tied for second highest with 80.64%.

Regarding whether each subject would help them “Achieve Future Goals,” history again received the third highest mean score with 3.61. English (4.45) overwhelmingly had the highest with math (4) second and science (3.52) last. English (77.42%) also had the highest agreement score, followed by math (70.97%). History had the third highest with 61.29%, followed by science (51.61%).

Figure 3. Graph of mean scores on the survey.

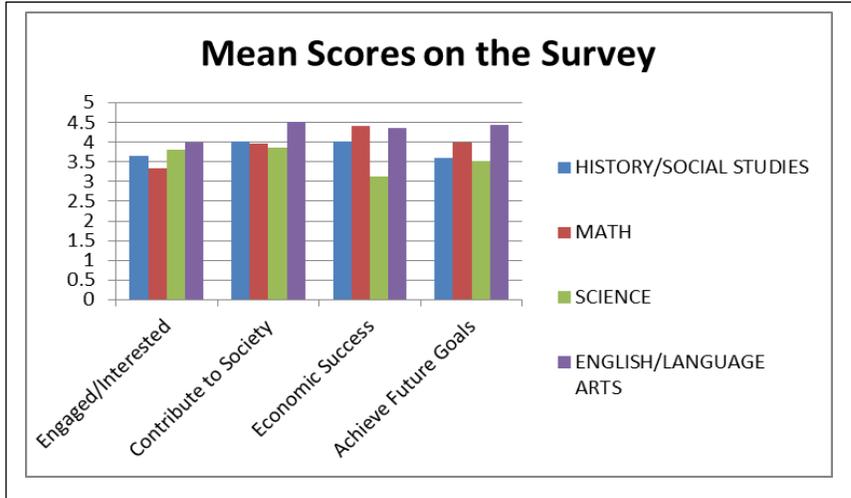
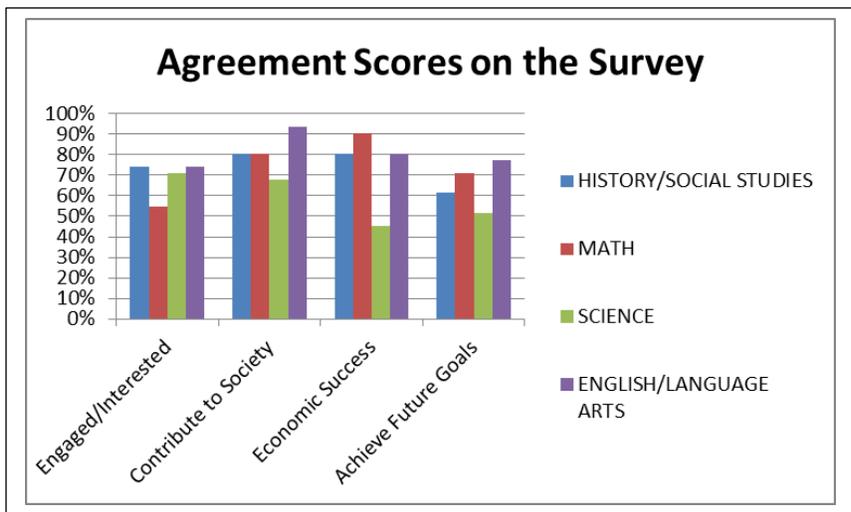


Figure 4. Graph of agreement scores on the survey.



What are the most effective teaching practices?

On the question of whether students felt “Engaged/Interested,” a theme that emerged in all three focus groups was the desire for group work, and two focus groups suggested competition and games like Kahoot to review. A response unique to the first focus group was the use of visuals or watching movies in history like the “Roots” series in American History. One girl stated that she was most interested by “anything that would give you a visual of what happened.” A participant in the second focus group immediately described history as “boring”

and usually centered on students taking notes. A male participant agreed that those notes were “not really” engaging. The participants then suggested games and competition would help them learn in a fun way. The second group also mentioned enjoying debates in English class and labs in science as ways they had been interested and engaged. On the subject of history, one male participant from the third focus group responded that he did not have any examples of being engaged this semester. This led the researcher to ask how history was usually taught, three participants described it as being taught through “notes.” The third group suggested putting information to music and stressed the importance of relating material to something they know, such as the examples used in Civics and Economics, to better engage them.

The second question on whether school or each subject would help the student “Contribute to Society” provided differing answers among the three focus groups. The first group mentioned the contribution to society being budgeting money through skills in Civics and Economics and math. Two members referenced the same project that told them how much money they made and asked them to plan buying a house and other monthly expenses in the budget. The first group also suggested English would help you understand leases and contracts. There was disagreement among the first group about whether or not science could help you contribute. One girl did not think it could, while another offered the example of a hot Pyrex dish exploding when cold water was put on it. The second focus group thought history could help in making informed decisions about politics. Also, they did not think algebra or imaginary numbers would help them. The second group said that they think it depends on what they wanted to do, like being a vet, a psychology major, history teacher, or photographer which were their interests. A participant in the third focus group stated that she did not think history will matter because “it all happened like a long time ago.” Another participant affirmed her remark with a nod and a

“yeah.” They did think that math would help them because you cannot do anything for the community without it.

On the question about the ability of school or the subjects to help them achieve “Economic Success,” each focus group of students immediately tied school with what college they could get into and by extension economic success. A female participant in the first group qualified the connection between high school and economic success by saying, “Well how you do [in high school] affects what you can do.” However, there was difference among the three focus groups about the subject-specific questions. The first group remarked that they believed English was the most important subject and that it would help them reach their goals of University of North Carolina-Wilmington, University of North Carolina-Greensboro, East Carolina University, and Pitt Community College. In the second focus group, the remark was made that science would help if there was an earthquake. The third focus group added that doing well in high school would help them get better jobs in addition to getting accepted into better colleges. They described their interests as Western Carolina, East Carolina, North Carolina Central, or University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Their job interests included becoming an accountant, engineer, architect, and nurse.

The last question on whether school and each subject would help them “Achieve Future Goals” provided a variety of responses among the focus groups. The first focus group’s general concerns were that of the need to study in college. One participant said, “I think the hardest part would be they don’t baby you as much in college as they do in high school.” She then went on to explain that she never had to study in high school and still managed to do well. The other participants nodded in agreement at her remark. The participants in the first focus group worried that they had not had a good math teacher and described math as being worksheets which some

could “get” or understand and some could not. The group suggested more examples and step by step instructions could improve their comprehension of the subject. Also, one participant was worried about history in college because she felt it was “a lot of memorizing.” Another participant responded to her by asking, “But you don’t have to take history, right?” The second focus group believed that high school success would help them get into North Carolina State, East Carolina, and out-of-state institutions. They believed that history was helping prepare them for the workload and English had them write a lot so it contributed to improvement.

The third focus group expressed the belief that school prepares you for college but not “real-life stuff” like taking out “a loan on a house,” “how to do taxes,” and a budget to “go grocery shopping.” On the subject specific questions, two participants shook their head no to the question of whether history would help them achieve their future goals. He began by saying, “I think it’s just a subject they give us.” The other participant, who did not think history would help, finished his thought by saying it was given because they did not have anything better. She then added, “I hate history.” The first participant expressed the idea that history is “old” so he stated it is only worthwhile “if I want to tell somebody a story.” These two group participants qualified their statements with the belief that Civics and Economics was different. They believed that class would help because of developing real-life skills like making a budget. The researcher asked the other participants of the group who had not yet responded on the subject of history. They shook their heads to indicate they did not think history would help them in their futures either. The third focus group said that math would definitely help but not in as great of detail as it is presented. They believed that science could help because it changes daily. For English, each participant of the group affirmed its importance in developing the way you

communicate, your potential to impress the boss, your ability to use big words, and interview skills in general.

DISCUSSION

Themes in Survey Results

With the survey results, it was clear that English was ranked higher by students for their engagement and importance in contributing to society and achieving future goals than math, history, and science. The only question English did not get the highest mean and agreement score was financial or economic success. In this category, English was ranked a close second to math. The focus group data could help explain the high-scoring phenomenon for that subject. Participants offered examples of their engagement in English class through a debate, the potential contribution to society through understanding leases and contracts, and in that subjects contribution to getting them into college to help them achieve economic success. To help them reach future goals, they praised English for helping them improve their writing skills in preparation for college and equipping them with interview and communication skills generally in the workplace. The description sharply contrasts the participants' resounding one-word description of the teaching of history as "notes." The participants' perceptions of English support the findings of Greene et al. (2004). Since the participants viewed tasks in English as meaningful and relevant to their futures, they responded more positively about the ability to be engaged, contribute to society, reach monetary success, and achieve their future goals. Similarly, McCarthy and Anderson (2000) found that classes using active role playing scored higher on essay exams than those taught solely by lecture. This could relate to the participant's explanation of engagement in English through debates. Actively using material to debate classmates could have been more meaningful to the participants than the notes they associated with history.

However, the finding suggests that the benefits associated with English could also be found in a history class through the use of debates, feedback on writing assignments, and opportunities to articulate ideas orally in presentations.

Themes in Focus Groups

One of the themes that emerged in all three focus groups was describing college as the benefit of doing well in each subject in high school. Interestingly, the female participant in the first group remarked, “Well how you do [in high school] affects what you can do.” This suggests that she made the connection that if you do not do well in high school, it can limit the amount of opportunities from which you can choose, or if you do well in high school, it can expand your future possibilities. Common among all three focus groups was the connection of each subject to getting into a good college which would then pay off in economic success. This suggests that participants in the focus groups believe that you must go to college to achieve economic success. Put differently, their responses reveal a belief that high school itself will not pay off economically except if it can help you get into college. The lack of reward in wages was noted as a reason for student apathy by Bishop (1989). As shown in the focus groups’ responses, students must believe that doing well in high school will not pay off directly except in the sense of gaining acceptance into a better college. The responses of the first and third group could also suggest that students primarily view college as a means to get a better job, rather than an expansion of their knowledge.

Another theme that clearly emerged among the three focus groups was the preference for topics or subjects that were clearly relevant to the participants’ lives. The first focus group suggested the benefit of Civics and Economics in creating a budget as a way to contribute to society. The third focus group remarked that teaching real-life skills would help them feel more

engaged or interested, and they used the example of Civics and Economics as a class where the material was clearly related to them. They returned to the idea of making a budget in that class as a response to whether subjects in school could help them achieve their future goals. Even the participant in the third group that said she hated history, admitted that she did like Civics and Economics. Students' interest in Civics and Economics for the reason of it fitting with their future plans and having relevance to their lives fits with the findings of Greene et al. (2004). Their study called the primary motivation factor future benefits and that meaningful and relevant tasks engaged students more. This directly supports the finding that the students liked Civics and Economics because they could see that it would benefit them in college, jobs, and life in general.

Participants in all the focus groups also called for cooperative learning as another way they would be engaged and interested in a subject. King (1993) pointed out that activities like Think-Pair-Share and group collaboration inspire students to find meaning in the material. As McCarthy and Anderson (2000) pointed out, students in group activities will be more active in preparing to complete their part of the project which can help them better acquire knowledge. Most importantly, as Barton and Levstik (2003) stated it is the duty of the teacher to prepare students to participate in democracy which includes collaboration and communication found in group work. After all, without preparing students for these tasks, they would not be as well-equipped to discuss differing views on politics or to join together to serve their community. With the importance of collaboration in today's society and in the nation's democracy, it makes sense that the participants readily suggested incorporating group work in the classroom.

Two of the focus groups suggested using games like Kahoot and other competition to help engage them. This appears to contradict the finding of Bishop (1989) that competition creates a zero-sum situation for rewards. He found that students worked harder in cooperative

environments. Also, Knight (2008) found that African American females in Advanced Placement classes attributed their lack of participation to the competitive environment. However, the present study cannot adequately address the possible contradiction. Since the only specific example given by the participants was Kahoot, the method of this game could have affected their answer. Using Kahoot, an individual's answer will not be seen by his or her classmates. This could help lower the risk of participating through this medium because peers will not know if the individual got the question correct or not. Competition of this sort is more private than speaking up in class as Knight researched. A discussion of what competition is perceived as positive and what competition is considered negative by students stretches beyond the scope of the present study.

Implications for Teachers

Teachers can help by creating an environment in history classes that promotes collaboration and helps develop other valuable skills like communication both in receiving and giving. While it may seem more chaotic to allow students to work in groups, they could be better engaged if given more activities of this sort. Group work could be structured in such a way to ensure that all students know their role and truly work to fulfill it for the good of the group. The goal at the end could be creating something new or any other project, as a participant suggested for increasing engagement. Collaboration with peers is also described as an important twenty-first century skill. It serves to build the important skill of communication at the same time. Students can learn to listen and respect others' views through work in groups. They can also learn to receive information in a written form through source analysis, which will help in the same way participants described in English. Students can practice articulating their thoughts through constructing well-organized essays or through vocalizing their thoughts in debates,

discussions, and presentations. By building communication skills in history classes, students will get the same benefits they described in their English classes. Therefore, one of the first steps in reaching students in the subject of history is creating an environment of collaboration with the goal of cultivating the essential twenty-first century skill of communication.

Focus group responses in favor of Civics and Economics and noting the benefit of skills taught in that class displayed that students already see a relevance in that area of social studies. However, history should not be discounted as a lost cause for engagement and importance in contributing to society, obtaining economic success, and accomplishing future goals. There are ways of teaching history that are capable of displaying these features. Kaiser (2010) suggested allowing students to pick a topic and research the impact of events in history on their topic. This project could be ongoing along with the lessons of the teacher. As in the example of the “math and science guy” enjoying history when researching aviation, all students could research the topics most meaningful to them. In another way, Drake and Brown (2003) build relevance to the students by including them in learning actively. The teacher is charged with selecting an important First-order document and Second-order documents to provide multiple perspectives from the initial source. Then, students get to bring in their own Third-order source, which can be anything from songs, pictures, diaries, or newspapers. Through that task, students are engaged and even driving their own learning. Because they are finding the source on their own, they are more likely to find it to be relevant to their lives. Also, it would give students increased exposure to visuals, music, and other unique sources that the participants described as ways to engage them. After all, as Roy Rosenzweig (1998) found, the American people do in fact feel connected to history, especially when it is made personal and relatable. With this in mind, it becomes the

task of history teachers to find creative ways to reach the students in their classrooms with the relevance of social studies or history.

CONCLUSION

While recent funding trends may be geared towards science and math, the respondents in the present study notably assigned the highest importance overall to English. Since all subjects seemed to have a high importance to the respondents, it is clear that some of them perceived each of the subjects as engaging and important to contribute to society, reach economic success, and achieve their future goals. The focus group discussion suggested that cooperative learning and collaboration as well as competition and games could help engage students. The participants also expressed great engagement and belief in the importance of subjects if they perceived the subject as relevant to their futures in college or equipping them with real life skills. Future studies could implement any of the participants' ideas to test whether students perceived the subject as more engaging or more important to contribute to society, reach economic success, or achieve future goals. Studies of that nature could help inform teaching practice so that students get the greatest benefit from history. Ultimately, the challenge facing history teachers is to inspire students not to merely see history as an important subject but to understand its importance to who they are and who they will become.

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APPENDIX A

1. I feel engaged with and interested in HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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1	2	3	4	5
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2. I feel that HISTORY is important in order to contribute to society.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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1	2	3	4	5
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3. I feel that HISTORY is important for my economic, financial, or monetary success.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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1	2	3	4	5
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4. I feel that HISTORY is important to my future because it will help me achieve my goals.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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5. I feel engaged with and interested in MATH.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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6. I feel that MATH is important in order to contribute to society.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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7. I feel that MATH is important for my economic, financial, or monetary success.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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8. I feel that MATH is important to my future because it will help me achieve my goals.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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9. I feel engaged with and interested in SCIENCE.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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10. I feel that SCIENCE is important in order to contribute to society.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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11. I feel that SCIENCE is important for my economic, financial, or monetary success.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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12. I feel that SCIENCE is important to my future because it will help me achieve my goals.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
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13. I feel engaged with and interested in ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

14. I feel that ENGLISH is important in order to contribute to society.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

15. I feel that ENGLISH is important for my economic, financial, or monetary success.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

16. I feel that ENGLISH is important to my future because it will help me achieve my goals.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX B**Focus Group Questions**

1. What are some examples of activities you find most engaging?
 - 1a. How have teachers engaged you in history or do you have any suggestions for ways they could interest you more?
 - 1b. How have teachers engaged you in math or do you have any suggestions for ways they could interest you more?
 - 1c. How have teachers engaged you in science or do you have any suggestions for ways they could interest you more?
 - 1d. How have teachers engaged you in English or do you have any suggestions for ways they could interest you more?
2. In what ways do you think skills from high school will help you contribute to society?
 - 2a. How do you think history will help or could help you contribute to society?
 - 2b. How do you think math will help or could help you contribute to society?
 - 2c. How do you think science will help or could help you contribute to society?
 - 2d. How do you think English will help or could help you contribute to society?
3. In what ways do you think skills from high school will help you achieve economic, financial, or monetary success?
 - 3a. How do you think history will help or could help you achieve economic, financial, or monetary success?
 - 3b. How do you think math will help or could help you achieve economic, financial, or monetary success?
 - 3c. How do you think science will help or could help you achieve economic, financial, or monetary success?
 - 3d. How do you think English will help or could help you achieve economic, financial, or monetary success?
4. In what ways do you think skills from high school will help you reach your goals for the future?
 - 4a. How do you think history will help or could help you reach your goals for the future?
 - 4b. How do you think math will help or could help you reach your goals for the future?
 - 4c. How do you think science will help or could help you reach your goals for the future?
 - 4d. How do you think English will help or could help you reach your goals for the future?