

Spring 2019

# The Impact of a Thematic Unit and Integration on Students' Achievement in Social Studies

Holness Samuels

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THE IMPACT OF A THEMATIC UNIT AND INTEGRATION ON STUDENTS'  
ACHIEVEMENT IN SOCIAL STUDIES

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education in

Curriculum and Instruction

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2019

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## DEDICATION

This action research is dedicated to my beautiful, caring, supportive, and understanding wife Carline, my wonderful daughters Kathrina, Shani, and Kara, and to my son Kevaun for understanding the many times that I could not play catch or watch cartoon with him because I was so busy reading, writing, typing, and preparing this dissertation. I know that I have a lot of catching up to do.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have in one way or another contributed to the completion and success of the dissertation. A big thank you to my family who has been with me from the beginning of my doctoral program. Thank you for the patience and understanding you demonstrated through the many days and nights of me giving divided attention as I worked on this project. Dr. Suha Tamim taught me several of the courses that I needed to bring me to this point in my doctoral program and has been with me throughout the dissertation preparation process. Her knowledge, expertise, and thoughtful insights have contributed greatly to my success. The many revisions that she insisted on served to ensure that this dissertation is of the highest quality.

Thanks to my superintendent, Mrs. Barbara Champagne for her approval with my data collection in the school and for her support and encouragement throughout the process. My colleague, Mr. Terrence Scott, was gracious to allow me to adjust the curriculum pacing guide to facilitate the thematic unit on World War 1. Thank you for consenting to me administering the unit to your class. Thanks to the seventh-grade students of Green Branch Middle School for your cooperation, participation, and honesty during the implementation of the thematic unit. Finally, thanks to my professors at the University of South Carolina who taught the different courses that made my journey through this doctoral program the enriching and rewarding experience it has been.

## ABSTRACT

This action research study focused on a problem of practice observed in a Title 1 middle school in rural South Carolina, where seventh-grade students show low academic achievement levels in social studies, evidenced by low scores on teacher-made tests, district benchmarks, and the state standardized test. To address this problem of practice, research questions were formulated: What is the impact of implementing a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, on students' motivation to learn social studies? What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One have on students' perception of social studies? and, What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One have students' academic achievement on a social studies unit test? A program of study employing the use of a thematic unit on World War One was administered to address the research questions.

The research was conducted within a six to eight-week period. Grounded in action research methodology and using a convergent mixed-method design, the study used a convenience sampling technique, involving two school- determined intact classes which formed a control group and a treatment group. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. The findings revealed that thematic teaching is an effective method of instruction but did not produce any significant difference in students' performance when compared to the traditional approaches to teaching social studies. An action plan was thus devised to include ways to incorporate thematic teaching as an alternative strategy to teaching social studies.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELA.....	English Language Arts
ELL.....	English Language Learner
GBMS.....	Green Branch Middle School
IEP.....	Individualized Education Plan
LGBTQ.....	Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgender, and Queer
MKO.....	More Knowledgeable Other
NCSS.....	National Council for the Social Studies
PBIS.....	Positive Behavior Intervention services
RTI.....	Response to Intervention
SCDE .....	South Carolina Department of Education
SC PASS.....	South Carolina Palmetto assessment of State Standards
SCSSAS.....	South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards
ZPD.....	Zone of Proximal Development

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Dewey (1938), in contrasting traditional education with progressive education, posits that traditional education imposes adult standards upon the young and immature, and are beyond the reach of the experience of young learners. While the teacher in Dewey's era was largely seen as perpetrator of this imposition, it is seldom recognized that the teacher was a victim as well. According to Mertler (2017) "traditional research in education is typically conducted by researchers who are somewhat removed from the environment they are studying" (p. 7). Consequently, there is the tendency to impose abstract research findings on schools and teachers with little or no attention paid to the local situation and adaptations that are required (Mertler, 2017). Dewey (1938) contended that teachers will even disguise the impositions of these findings under the tenets of good teaching practices.

According to Mertler (2017), there is a growing trend in research as more and more studies are being conducted by *practitioners* - people whose primary education and training is *not* in research methodology. He sees this as "action research" which he defines as research that is done by teachers for themselves. Action research offers a form of systematic inquiry that is usually appealing to teachers as it enables them to focus on areas of their own practice that they consider worth investigating. This kind of research aims to make an impact on students' learning and to deepen teachers' understanding of issues in their classrooms that may be puzzling, problematic, or intriguing (Burns, 2010).

The idea of a teacher as a researcher might appear novel, based on the traditional mindset of viewing the teacher as a technician who implements the research findings of ‘outside’ experts (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). It is, however, the elements of documenting, reflecting, and publishing, which are now formalized, and which are used as tools to plan, drive, evaluate instruction, and expand the body of educational literature, that appear to be novel. For teachers who have been used to considering themselves first and foremost as classroom practitioners, embarking on any kind of research is a challenging undertaking.

While the goals of traditional educational research and action research are similar (to improve the quality of teaching and learning) they differ in approach and sometimes methodology (McMillan & Wergin, 1998; Adu, 2017). For one, action research is more practical than philosophical in its application and is done by teachers in their natural classroom setting (Mertler, 2017). According to Mertler (2017) the main goal of action research is to address local-level problems with the anticipation of finding immediate solutions. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) seem to concur, observing that action research should bring about change of some kind, usually with a social justice focus.

This action research endeavored to depart from the imposition of adult standards on students, to create more relevant and meaningful learning experiences that students are interested in and can relate to (Dewey, 1938). The action research explored the overarching research question of how the use of a thematic unit and an integrated approach to teaching social studies could increase students’ motivation to learn social studies, retention of social studies content, and their academic achievement as expressed by higher scores on teacher-made and standardized tests. Thematic units and integration

are student-centered approaches that align with the Learner-Centered ideology of curriculum pedagogy (Schiro, 2013). They are well compatible with differentiated instruction and students are appropriately challenged, resulting in less boredom or feelings of overwhelming difficulty (Anderson & Cook, 2014). Loughran (2005) defines thematic teaching as “a process of integrating and linking multiple elements of a curriculum in an ongoing exploration of many different aspects of a topic or subject” (p. 3). The hope was that the treatment would enrich students’ learning experiences, provided motivation for them to learn social studies content, and improved their academic achievement in social studies through higher test scores.

The action research is grounded in the theoretical framework of self-efficacy theory and change theory. According to Akhtar (2008) self-efficacy, or confidence, is the optimistic self-belief in one’s competence or chances of successfully accomplishing a task and producing a favorable outcome. The originator of the theory, Albert Bandura (2008) names four sources of efficacy beliefs: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional and psychological states. Working around a common theme and integrating different disciplines where students get the opportunity to display their strengths and mastery and improve on their weaknesses could undoubtedly lead to greater motivation and self-efficacy, and an increased motivation to learn social studies content.

According to Elmore (2004) the development of systematic knowledge about, and related to, large-scale instructional improvement requires a change in the prevailing culture of administration and teaching in schools. Change theory or change knowledge can be very powerful in informing education reform strategies and, in turn, getting

results, but only in the hands (and minds, and hearts) of people who have a deep knowledge of the dynamics of how the factors in question operate to get results (Fullan, 2006). A commitment to changing strategies for teaching and learning will always increase motivation and yield positive results regardless of one's so-called learning style. The use of integration strategies is one such example.

### **Problem of Practice**

Seventh-grade students at Green Branch Middle School (GBMS) (pseudonym), a Title 1 School located in rural South Carolina, displayed a lack of motivation to do social studies as was reflected in low retention of social studies content and low academic achievements in the subject. These students were mainly African Americans, from a low socio-economic background, and many were also struggling readers. As I engaged in ongoing student observations I found that students who struggled the most with reading and retention of content material were usually the most disruptive in class. Based on their performance on reviews of previous days' lessons, it was evident that most students do not review for the required twenty minutes daily at home. Students rarely completed homework assignments, and this seemed to be a school wide problem that was expressed by the content area teachers in the middle school. Thus, as a teacher/school this presented a problem as reflected in low performances on classroom assessments, district benchmarks, as well as state standardized tests. According to the South Carolina State Department of Education, in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 only 60.6%, 57.7%, 57.5% and 54.8% respectively, of seventh-grade students at GBMS met or exceeded state standards on the South Carolina Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (SCPASS). GBMS is a one-to-one school. This means that each student is given a district-provided MacBook to



help them integrate technology into their learning and to learn research skills. Many students, however, violate the technology policy by accessing social media and other non-education related sites. Students often become disrespectful when spoken to about the misuse of technology. As an action researcher reflecting on my own practice, I was thus led to devise a new strategy (a thematic unit and an integrated approach) to combat this apparent lack of motivation to work and to seek to improve students' academic achievement in social studies so that one hundred percent of students would achieve Met or Exemplary on the state standardized test.

### **Purpose of Study**

In identifying a problem of practice, Mintrop (2016) postulates that instead of overreaching, we should focus on a defined problem for which we can provide useful new remedies within a short timeframe and at a workable scale. In keeping with Mintrop's (2016) advice, the purpose of this study was to determine the impact that the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, would have on students' attitude towards social studies, their perception of the subject, and their academic achievement in a middle school seventh-grade social studies class. In utilizing a thematic approach, the students would receive multiple opportunities to learn and respond to social studies content across different subject areas. Consequently, I believed that students' attitude and motivation to learn social studies would increase, along with their ability to retain social studies content, which would also result in an increase in their academic achievement, through higher test scores. When students become interested in a topic that is taught in more than one subject, they are more likely to be motivated to pay attention in these various classes and have a desire to learn (Lee, 2007).

Additionally, given the student-centered nature of thematic units, the variety of activities done across subject areas, and the opportunity to demonstrate learning in multiple ways, I believed that the use of a thematic unit and integration would provide such meaningful learning experiences as to reduce class disruptions, increase student engagement, and address the multiple modalities in the way students learn. Dewey (1938) states that it is the educator's business to "arrange for the kind of experiences which . . . do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities . . . and promote desirable future experiences" (p. 27). Longitudinally, I hoped that students would develop a passion for social studies learning as they proceeded to high school and into tertiary education.

### **Significance of the Study**

Johnson (2014) wrote that South Carolina's rural, impoverished school districts along I-95 are collectively known as the "Corridor of Shame," because of how poorly the dilapidated schools perform in the region. Thirty-six of South Carolina's poorest school districts sued the state in what was the longest running court case in the state's history, lasting 21 years. The case (Abbeville County School District vs. The State of South Carolina) was decided in 2014 when in a 3-2 ruling, the South Carolina supreme Court ruled that the state had failed in its duty to provide what it says was a "minimally adequate" education to children in the state's poorest school districts. Even before the case was decided, there were individuals throughout the Corridor who were finding their own ways of improving the education system for the affected students. The middle school featured in this action research is found in the general region that Johnson (2014) described as the "Corridor of Shame." There is also the belief that race is an integral part

of this delineation as the areas are predominantly African American communities that have suffered from an apparent institutionalized neglect, as well as generational poverty (Johnson, 2014). While the poor, rural districts bear some responsibility for their chronically low academic performance, the court stated: “Nevertheless, it is the Defendants who must take the principal initiative, as they bear the burden articulated by our state’s Constitution and have failed in their constitutional duty to ensure that students in the Plaintiff Districts receive the requisite educational opportunity” (Click & Hinshaw, 2015).

There is a general belief that educational practitioners are in some way committed to issues of social justice, and that schools should provide equality of educational opportunity (Bettez & Hytten, 2011). The injustice of child poverty is a fundamental one. Children cannot be held accountable for deprivations they may experience, or deficiencies of shelter, food, healthcare, and emotional care (Jackson, 2014). Children in poverty are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance. This reality does not mean that success in school or life is impossible, but a better understanding of these challenges points to actions educators can take to help their less-advantaged students succeed (Jenson, 2009).

I hoped that the findings from this action research would reflect a significant improvement in students’ motivation to learn social studies, a greater retention of social studies content, and an increased academic achievement in the seventh-grade social studies classes. I believe that this action research will be of significance to educators of students who share similar characteristics as the population in the study. These findings

can then be replicated in similar schools and eventually add to the body of social studies best practices. I also believe that action research that seeks to study ways to improve opportunities to learn using a thematic unit in an integrated approach that also incorporates trade books (children's literature) will address the issues of motivation, content retention among lower SES students, and will also address the social justice issue of closing the achievement and opportunity gaps between lower socio-economic status students and their more affluent peers.

### **Research Questions**

Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) declare that “as teachers seek out change and reflect on practice, the first step of their journey begins with brainstorming questions or wonderings for exploration” (p. 30). I pondered that the questions below could be explored within certain feasibility constraints (Mintrop, 2016) as I researched the use of a thematic unit and an integrated approach to increase student motivation, retention of content, and academic achievement in my social studies course, as part of an action research study.

The impetus for the study came from my own observations of my students, mainly African Americans, from low socio-economic backgrounds, who showed an apparent lack the motivation to learn or retain information in my social studies classes and have low academic achievement levels in the subject. To create greater continuity from one social studies topic to another, I was interested in studying the following questions:

RQ 1: What is the impact of implementing a thematic unit on World War 1, an integrated approach, on students' motivation to learn social studies?

RQ 2: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War 1, an integrated approach, have on students' perception of social studies?

RQ 3: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War 1 have on students' performance on a social studies unit test?

### **Positionality**

As a teacher for 28 years, I know that students come to my classroom with varying interests and achievement levels and it is my responsibility to create the environment that will help them to achieve their full academic potential. Faced with the problem of low motivation to learn social studies, low retention of social studies content, and low academic achievement in my seventh-grade social studies classes, I held the view that employing a new strategy involving a thematic unit and integration would help my students to increase their academic achievement in the subject.

Mertler (2017) suggests that action research should be integrated within the context of what teachers typically do in their classroom instead of being some sort of stand-alone endeavor that they have a difficult time relating to their instructional practices or simply finding time to do. I have been working in the school district for nine years and was the only social studies teacher in the middle school for eight of those nine years. From this unique vantage point, I was solely responsible for the implementation of different strategies that have been used in social studies instruction in the middle school. I am also fully cognizant of the results of district benchmarks as well as state standardized test scores for the past eight years. I was held fully accountable for students' performances in social studies, and I took the task of social studies instruction very seriously.

Over the years, however, to satisfy the district's preoccupation with standardized test scores, I felt compelled to be more content-oriented instead of student-oriented in my approach to teaching social studies. My desire was always to ensure that the curriculum was covered to prepare students for the state test. A more traditional approach to teaching was used as a time saving measure. This strategy was met with mixed results, and the eighth-grade students always outperformed the seventh grade on these tests. I have come to accept that 'covering' should not be equated with learning. This acceptance led me to focus this action research on the seventh grade as well as to utilize a new approach which was that of a thematic unit and integration.

Seeing that the research was conducted during the normal course of classroom teaching, and as an administrator who presently do not engage in everyday classroom instruction, I held the unique position of teacher- researcher-observer. My role in the research was to create the thematic unit on World War 1 and collaborate with the present seventh-grade social studies teacher to implement its integration with the other core content subjects of English Language Arts (ELA), science, and mathematics, as well as the arts and music. I taught the lessons in which the thematic unit was administered to the treatment group while the other teacher taught the other social studies class using traditional strategies. I was not able to observe the control group but made notes as I taught and observe the treatment group the thematic unit on World War One. My responsibility also included the creation and administering of the pre-test and post-test, the survey of attitude to social studies, the survey of subject preference, as well as the interview protocol. From these strategies and instruments, I recorded and analyzed a trove of quantitative and qualitative data and presented the findings using different

quantitative and qualitative methods of data representation. The findings of the research were used to develop an action plan that will be presented to the school administration and the relevant district personnel.

### **Research Design**

According to Mertler (2017) action research studies align more to the mixed-methods design because most educators when investigating their own classroom practices, see much benefit in collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. This action research utilized a convergent mixed-method design, generating and triangulating both qualitative and quantitative data and incorporating descriptive and inferential statistics in the process of data analysis. The following section of the dissertation will outline the setting/site of the research, the participants who were involved in the study, the intervention that was used, the methods and instruments that were used to collect the data, as well as how the data was analyzed.

**Setting.** The action research focused on the seventh-grade students at GBMS, a small Title 1 school located in rural South Carolina. The middle school had a population of 169 students (2018 - 2019 enrollment from PowerSchool) in grades six, seven, and eight. The seventh grade had an enrollment of 54 students. The middle school occupies one hall of the high school and shares cafeteria, gym, and other common areas with the high school. The school population is 98% black with about 2% whites and Hispanic combined. 100% of students receive free meals.

The school teaches the core curriculum subjects of Mathematics, ELA, Social Studies, and Science. In addition, electives are offered, namely, art, dance, Spanish,

keyboarding, physical education, robotics, band, and chorus. Students participate in sports such as football, track and field, basketball, baseball, softball, and cheerleading.

**Participants.** The study sample consisted of 40 seventh-grade students, comprising 15 males and 25 females. Study participants were derived from a convenience sample of students who were divided into two school- determined intact groups. Group one will comprised one class with a total of 14 students and was the control group. Group one was taught using traditional strategies such as explicit direct instruction, lectures, textbooks, videos, class discussions, and reading guides. Group two (26 students) was the treatment group that benefitted from the use of thematic unit on World War One, and an integrated approach, encompassing the core subjects, as well as art, role playing, trade books (children’s literature), and music. The unit also incorporated issues of social justice.

Seventy-eight percent of the student-participants (31 students) were African-American, and 18% (seven students) were white. There was one Hispanic female (2%) and one Asian-American male (2%). Six students were regarded as special needs students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) (one in the control group and three in the treatment group), and two students (one in the control group and one in the treatment group) have 504 plans, a federally mandated set of accommodations for students with disabilities (based on section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973). There was one English Language Learners (ELL) female in the treatment group. None of the students identify as members of the Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer (LGBTQ) community.



**Intervention.** The period of data collection lasted for four weeks and was conducted in the fall of 2018. Week one was dedicated to the collection of data through the attitude towards social studies survey, subject preference survey, and the pre-test on World War One. The actual thematic unit on World War One took two weeks to cover. Ten lessons on the thematic unit were taught for one hour per day (for two weeks) to the treatment group (comprising of 26 students). The breakdown of the lessons and the state standard indicators that they addressed are outlined below in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1

*Alignment of Lessons to SC Social Studies Standard Indicators*

Lesson #	Topic	Standard Indicator
1	Introduction Causes: Militarism, Alliances, Nationalism	7-4.1
2	Causes: Imperialism, Assassination	7-4.1
3	Key events	7-4.1
4	New inventions	7-4.1
5	Casualties	7-4.1
6	America's entry	7-4.1
7	End of the war/Treaty of Versailles	7-4.2
8	The League of Nations	7-4.2
9	The World Changes/New Countries Created	7-4.2
10	American Isolationism/Rebuilding	7- 4.1, 7.4.2

The lessons from the thematic unit addressed the South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards (SCSSAS) for seventh-grade social studies covering the following indicators:

- 7 -4.1 Explain the causes and course of World War I, including militarism, alliances, imperialism, nationalism, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the impact of Russia’s withdrawal from, and the United States entry into the war.
- 7-4.2 Explain the outcomes of World War I, including the creation of President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, the Treaty of Versailles, the shifts in national borders, and the League of Nations.

The unit was integrated with the other core subjects of mathematics and science, as well as art, music, and literature as shown in Table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2

*Thematic Unit on World War One*

Art	Math	Science	Music	ELA	Literature/Drama
Draw a diagram of the trenches of World War One	Plot a graph of the casualties of World War One.	Research the different components of poison gases	Learn the song “Over There”	Write a poem or short story on World War One.	Read the book “ <i>Hero Over Here: A Story of World War I</i> ” by Kathleen Kudinski. Discuss.
Draw an invention that could solve a problem in World War One	Measure distances using scales on a map.	Research and report on the disease called trench foot.	Compose a song or rap about World War One.	Define each term in the acrostic: MANIA, as the causes of World War 1; use each term in a sentence.	Role play the nature of alliances through friendships

Art	Math	Science	Music	ELA	Literature/Drama
Create a cartoon of the Allied Powers forcing the terms of the Treaty of Versailles on Germany	Create a math game on World War One.	Research the reason for the flu epidemic after World War 1.		Do a quick write/journal entry on each day's lesson.	
Color a map of Europe showing the alliances before the war.	Research the dimensions of a U-boat and create a drawing to scale.			Write a letter to the president or congress on the negative consequences of war.	
Color a map of Europe to show the new countries that were created after the war.				Write an article outlining the reason(s) for American isolationism after World War 1.	

Due to my new job assignment, I was able to teach the thematic unit to the treatment group but was unable to do observations of the control group as I had originally envisioned. Each day after teaching I made notes on the lesson and how students responded to the different activities. Thus, I engaged in an ongoing process of data analysis. In week four (after the completion of the thematic unit), students completed an identical post-test on World War One. In week four I also re-administered the survey of

students' subject preference, and the Likert scale of students' attitude towards social studies to the treatment group to help determine whether students' perception of, motivation to work, and attitude towards social studies had changed because of the thematic unit. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 students primarily based on their scores on the post-test, but also as a follow up to the students' surveys, to clarify data from observations, and to discuss students' attitude towards the thematic unit.

**Data collection methods and instruments.** Prior to the study, both the control and treatment groups completed a survey of subject preference to gauge their subject preferences and to give an idea as to where social studies fall in their line of preferences. I administered a pretest of thirty-three multiple choice questions to each group on the World War One unit being studied, as a quantitative measure. A posttest of the same thirty-three multiple choice questions were administered to both groups at the end of the unit as a summative assessment measure. To ensure test validity, the items from for the pre- and post-tests were taken directly from the Case 21 Test Bank and the USA Testprep Bank, both of which are directly aligned to the SC state standards and Support Document (which outlines the content that should be taught for each standard).

As another quantitative measure, both groups completed a ten-question Likert scale survey of attitude towards social studies before the unit of study, while the treatment group completed both the subject preference survey and the Likert scale of attitude towards social studies survey after the completion of the thematic unit. The Liker survey included questions on motivation to learn and retention of social studies content. Qualitative data were gleaned from students through observations and semi-structured interviews. The observation schedule included a recording of students' reaction to

different aspects of the lesson, their general demeanor, as well as their level of participation. The semi-structured interview protocol provided follow up data on students' performance on the post-test as well as their responses to the surveys and the thematic unit. Seventeen students were interviewed, the top nine performances and the nine lowest performers on the post-test. The survey instruments and interview schedule were pilot tested with another group of students other than the study population before actual implementation in the study and were found to be reliable.

A triangulation of findings was done to obtain an overall picture of what the data from all the instruments collectively mean in an attempt to answer the research questions in terms of the effectiveness of the use of the thematic unit and an integrated approach on students' attitude, perception, and motivation to do social studies, their level of retention of social studies content, and their academic achievement in social studies. In the future, beyond the scope of this present study, the treatment will be replicated with the control group to provide them with opportunity of benefiting from the use of the thematic unit and integrated teaching. More information will be gleaned on the effectiveness of this approach on students learning achievements in social studies. All instruments used in the data collection are placed in the appendix section at the end of this dissertation.

**Data analysis.** Quantitative analysis of data derived from tests and quizzes included measures of central tendency (mean, mode, median), and standard deviation to were used as appropriate to compare data within groups as well between the control and treatment groups. Likert scale responses from the survey of attitude to social studies and the subject preference surveys were analyzed quantitatively using tables, charts, and

graphs. Qualitative data from the semi-structured interview protocol were categorized and presented using descriptive narratives and comparison.

### **Limitations**

One of the major complaints most teacher- practitioners make is the relatively short time there is to meet the curriculum requirements, given the volume of content to cover and the required pace to cover it. Time was of the essence in conducting this action research. Time constraint may have hindered the thorough process of data collection and the in-depth analysis that was required to adequately address the research questions, to meet the deadline requirement for submission of the action research, which was determined as a six to eight-week period for data collection.

The researcher felt that even though students were given a thorough explanation of the nature of the research and the fact that their identities would not be revealed in the data analysis and publishing of the dissertation, they did not quite trust the researcher. This also came out in the semi-structured interviews where students appeared tense and uncertain and gave really short answers to the questions.

Student attendance and punctuality are issues for concern at GBMS. Many students are habitually absent from school while others often show up late for school because they miss the school bus or because parents often do errands before dropping them off. Others are pulled early from classes at parents' convenience. Due to the large number of absences, I worried that the student-participants may not benefit from the rich learning experiences that a thematic unit and an integrated approach would offer. I hoped the opposite would occur and attendance would have increased due to the highly

motivating and student-centered nature of the lessons in a thematic unit. The mean daily attendance for the treatment group during the data collection period was 92%.

Seeing that the regular seventh-grade social studies teacher was present during the lessons in the thematic unit, he may have used some of the activities with the control group that may have influenced their outcomes. Finally, given that the action research was conducted with students of low socio-economic status (SES), the research may need to be replicated with more affluent students to determine its effect on the level of motivation, academic achievement, and retention of social studies content within that demography.

### **Summary and Organization of the Dissertation**

Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) concede that data analysis and concluding thoughts may or may not answer the research question but may instead generate additional questions and further inquiries. The data that were gathered yielded valuable results that were proven meaningful in answering the research questions as well as in addressing the stated problem of practice at GBMS. This set the stage for the development of an action plan, which is essentially a proposed strategy for the implementation of the results of the study (Mertler, 2017). A detailed proposal of the action plan is explained in chapter five of this dissertation. I hope that new wonderings will be generated that will lead to replication and new inquiry into the nature of learning social studies with a similar view to increase academic achievement.

The United States constitution does not explicitly outline the right to education as one of the fundamental rights of its citizens, even though it clearly gives people the right to bear arms, as stated in the Second Amendment. In today's context, education seems to

have become a political football, and one's zip code is largely seen as the major determinant to the quality of education one receives, and the level of academic achievement one attains (Donohue, 2014). While the goal for this Dissertation in Practice was to answer the research questions, I hope that one of the new wonderings generated will lead to action that will seek to address the social justice issue of quality education for low socio-economic students to increase their academic achievement in social studies and hopefully bring joy and the love of learning social studies into their lives.

This dissertation sought to determine the impact of a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, on a group of seventh-grade students who are experiencing low academic achievement in social studies. The study is organized around five chapters. Chapter one is centered on the identified problem and the measures that will be taken to correct the problem through the formulation of research questions to guide the study. In chapter two there is a review and in-depth synthesis of the existing literature on the problem of academic achievement in social studies, including its causes. Information is also presented on the effectiveness of the implementation of thematic units and integration based on past research findings. Chapter three outlines the study design and methodology used to collect the data. This chapter also includes the research location and population and seeks to address the issues of validity and reliability of the research. Chapter four focuses on data analysis and findings and utilizes different methods of representing data. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis measures and representation were utilized. In chapter five, information is presented in terms of the present and future implication of the findings and recommendations of actions from the results. An action plan was developed to address the changes and actions that need to take



place because of the research findings. The dissertation concludes with a list of references of the literature used, and an appendix which includes attachments of the instruments of data collection and consent forms used in the study.

### **Glossary of Terms**

This Dissertation in Practice was centered on questions as to whether the use of a thematic unit on World War One will improve students' perception of, and motivation to learn social studies, increase their retention of social studies content, and increase their academic achievement in social studies in a middle school seventh-grade class. The action research was also conducted using students from a low socio-economic background. Below are the definitions of these terms as they are used in this action research.

**Thematic Unit.** This is a curriculum unit of study that is organized around a general theme and incorporates different subjects across the curriculum into the main theme. Themes should be fun and engaging and can be designed to last anywhere from one week to several weeks. Each activity should have a focus toward the thematic idea (Cox, 2017).

**Integration or Integrated Approach.** Educationally, integration is utilizing different subjects/content areas in teaching a topic or theme to increase student interest and engagement, help students to make connections, save time, address students' multiple intelligences, improve learning outcomes, and aid in long term retention of content. Thematic teaching, otherwise called Interdisciplinary teaching or Integrated instruction, provide methodology for students to utilize otherwise fragmented knowledge and thought processes to help make connections and solve problems in the real world by involving other disciplines (Moyer, 2016).

**Motivation.** Motivation is the drive or desire to carry out an action. This desire may be from within (intrinsic), or it may develop because of external stimulation (extrinsic) (Cherry, 2016).

**Retention.** Retention (as used in the research) is the ability to store information in long term memory and being able to retrieve this information when needed. Long term memory is memory that involves the storage and recall of information over a long period of time (as days, weeks, or years) (merriam-webster.com).

**Perception.** Perception is the way that you think about something or the impression you have of it. It refers to the collecting of information about the world by means of the senses (Cutting, 1987).

**Academic achievement.** This is the actual evidence of learning whether through formative, summative, or alternative assessment methods. It is the accomplishment and achievement of education through academic learning principles (Nugent, 2013).

**Socio-economic Status (SES).** This term relates to one's social and economic standing within a group, as determined by income, education, occupation, access to resources and opportunities, as well as the amount of privilege that one has ((Adler et al, 2006).

**Trade Books.** These are literature books that are written in story form, using fictional characters and pictures to teach valuable social studies content as well as issues of social justice. Fuhler (1991) postulates the use of trade books as a viable supplement to the use of textbooks to motivate students in social studies. He states that “teachers who take the opportunity to experiment with the illuminating trade book, integrating a variety of fiction and nonfiction choices throughout the curriculum, can revitalize their curriculum and add spark and sizzle to the social studies classroom” (p. 234). In the thematic

approach that my action research will focus on, I will use trade books as part of the integration with English Language Arts.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This action research explores the research questions of how the use of a thematic unit and an integrated approach to teaching social studies will increase students' perception of, and motivation to learn social studies, increase retention of social studies content, and improve academic achievement in a seventh- grade middle school social studies class. The researcher hoped that the treatment would enrich students' learning experiences, provide motivation for them to learn social studies content, and improve their academic achievement in social studies.

#### **Statement of Problem of Practice**

Seventh-grade students at Green Branch Middle School (pseudonym), a Title 1 School located in rural South Carolina, display low academic achievements in social studies. These students are mainly African Americans, from a low socio-economic background. Ongoing student observations reveal that most of these students are struggling readers who do not retain content material and are usually disruptive in class. There is also a school-wide problem of students rarely completing homework assignments. As an action researcher reflecting on my own practice, I was led to devise a new strategy utilizing a thematic unit and integration to combat this apparent lack of motivation to work, and to seek to improve students' academic achievement in social studies.

## **Research Questions**

To create greater continuity from one social studies topic to another, I was interested in studying the following questions:

RQ 1: What is the impact of implementing a thematic unit on World War 1 on students' motivation to learn social studies?

RQ 2: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War 1, an integrated approach, have on students' perception of social studies?

RQ 3: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War 1 have on students' performance on unit test in social studies?

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact that the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, would have on students' perception of, motivation to work, and academic achievement in a middle school social studies class. In utilizing a thematic or interdisciplinary approach, the students received multiple opportunities to learn and respond to social studies content across different subject areas. Consequently, the researcher believed that their level of motivation to learn social studies would increase, along with their ability to retain social studies content, which would result in an increase in their academic achievement in the subject. Given the student-centered nature of thematic units and integration and the opportunity to demonstrate learning in multiple ways, I hoped that the use of a thematic unit and integration would provide such meaningful learning experiences as to increase student engagement, reduce class disruptions, change students' perception of social studies in a positive direction, motivate students to do well in social studies, and increase their

academic achievement on social studies assessment, including teacher-made tests, district benchmarks, and state standardized tests. My goal was to create engaging activities that would promote a love for social studies learning and desirable future learning experiences (Dewey, 1938) as students proceed to high school and into tertiary education.

### **Purpose and Methodology of the Literature Review**

The first crucial steps in any research study are to clearly identify the topic under investigation and to examine the existing research and any other related information associated with the topic (Mertler, 2017). Mertler (2017) adds that “a review of literature allows you to use the insights and discoveries of others whose research came before yours in order to make your research more efficient and effective” (p. 61). The literature review presents an evidenced- based analysis of the present understanding of the topic and guides the reader towards a cohesive awareness and understanding of what the research question is (Gray, 2014; Machi & McEvoy, 2016). This literature review is not an attempt to “reinvent the wheel” (Mertler, 2017, p. 61) but to provide a credible case surrounding my problem of practice and my stated research question, that expectedly will be one that produces conclusions resulting from a logical presentation of supporting evidence (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

The literature search included Education Source and ERIC databases utilizing foundational as well as current research on the different topics of interest. The search yielded a plethora of important primary and secondary sources that are relevant to the study. Internet sources were also examined as well as books, magazines, and any other sources that could provide valuable information on the literature. I am confident that this

literature review will provide valuable insights into the rationale and scope of my action research.

The literature review began by examining the nature of social studies to give an insight into what the subject encompasses, and its relevance to the individual as well as society. It then highlighted the importance of social studies education in developing good citizenship and the promotion of democratic ideals. This was followed by an examination of the factors that influence students' performance in social studies to bring an awareness to the myriad of variables that impact social studies learning and to create an understanding of the problem of practice. Answers to the research questions were focused on the application and effectiveness of thematic units and integration in the teaching of social studies with the other core curriculum subjects in addition to the non-core subjects of art, music, and literature. Finally, the literature review examined the nature and historical perspective of thematic units as well as presented its alignment to the Learner-Centered curriculum ideology.

### **The Nature of Social Studies**

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (2017) defines social studies as:

The integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provide coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to

help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (p. 1)

The aim of social studies is the promotion of civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life. By making civic competence a central aim, NCSS (2017) emphasizes the importance of educating students who are committed to the ideas and values of democracy. Civic competence rests on this commitment to democratic values and requires that citizens have the ability to use their knowledge about their community, nation, and world; to apply inquiry processes; and to employ skills of data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving. Young people who are knowledgeable, skillful, and committed to democracy are necessary to sustaining and improving our democratic way of life and participating as members of a global community (NCSS, 2017).

According to the NCSS (2016), a powerful and rigorous social studies curriculum provides strategies and activities that engage students with significant ideas and encourages them to connect what they are learning to their prior knowledge and to current issues, to think critically and creatively about what they are learning, and to apply that learning to authentic situations. The NCSS (2016) continues:

The social studies curriculum is integrative, addressing the totality of human experience over time and space, connecting with the past, linked to the present, and looking ahead to the future. Powerful social studies teaching combines elements of all the disciplines as it provides opportunities for students to



conduct inquiry, develop and display data, synthesize findings, and make judgments. (p. 181)

The NCSS (2017) proposes a social studies curriculum that focuses on ten themes:

1. Culture
2. Time, Continuity, and Change
3. People, Places, and Environments
4. Individuals Development and Identity
5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
6. Power, Authority, and Governance
7. Production, Distribution, and Consumption
8. Science, Technology, and Society
9. Global Connections
10. Civic Ideals and Practices

The NCSS (2017) states that these themes are interrelated and represent a way of categorizing knowledge about the human experience and constitute the organizing strands that should thread through a social studies curriculum, from grades Pre-K through twelve, as appropriate at each level. Embedded in the NCSS (2017) outline of the social studies curriculum is the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework which is driven by the following shared principles about high quality social studies education:

- Social studies prepare the nation’s young people for college, careers, and civic life.
- Inquiry is at the heart of social studies.

- Social studies involve interdisciplinary applications and welcomes integration of the arts and humanities.
- Social studies is composed of deep and enduring understandings, concepts, and skills from the disciplines. Social studies emphasize skills and practices as preparation for democratic decision-making.
- Social studies education should have direct and explicit connections to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (NCSS, 2017).

Byford and Chiodo (2004) observe that through the years, ongoing changes in curriculum design, teaching methodology, and administrative practices may have helped to improve students' perception of social studies, but an attitude persists among many students that social studies classes are dull, boring, and irrelevant to their lives. If the curriculum in social studies is to continue to have support from school administrators, politicians, and the public, it is desirable to have positive student attitudes towards the subject matter. Anderson and Cook (2014) point to the challenges social studies teachers face today in having to cover an overwhelming amount of content in a relatively short period of time, given our more test conscious school context. They contend that social studies teachers are thus prompted to adopt a more teacher-centered instructional approach which is usually textbook driven, and which results in students developing negative attitudes towards social studies, as they are not engaged or experiencing any real-life connection to the material. Haladyna and Shaughnessy (1985) captured why social studies is one of the least liked subjects by stating that “it is the teacher who is key to what social studies will be for the student. Instruction tends to be dominated by the

lecture, textbook or worksheets.... and social studies does not inspire students to learn” (p.694).

Byford and Chiodo (2004) observed too that in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, there is a renewed interest in civic education and a thrust towards patriotism, which have led towards a new focus on social studies. Notwithstanding, Brewer and Brown (2009) see a marginalization of social studies, especially in the elementary level. The effect of this marginalization along with many other factors that affect student achievement in social studies are outlined below.

### **Factors Affecting Students’ Achievement in Social Studies**

This section of the study highlights several factors that affect students’ performance in social studies. Among these are the marginalization of social studies, students’ socio-economic background, parental involvement in school, completion of homework assignments, student motivation, absenteeism, social promotion, involvement in extra-curricular activities, reading levels, behavioral issues/school engagement, study skills and retention of content, and instructional strategy.

**Marginalization of social studies.** Brewer and Brown (2009) point to the marginalization of social studies in elementary schools. They observe that in this climate of high-stakes testing and accountability, both visual arts and social studies often are marginalized in the elementary school curriculum. Teaching and learning in these areas typically are not provided adequate instructional time in the elementary classroom and because social studies is not included in the testing agenda in district and state standardized tests, elementary teachers are choosing to spend time teaching other skills that will boost test scores (Burstein, Curtis, & Hutton, 2006.). Adams, Bolick and Willox

(2010) in their study *The Marginalization of Elementary Social Studies in Teacher Education* presents the case of two different states, Virginia, which tests social studies in elementary schools, and North Carolina, where social studies is not tested until middle school. Adams et al. (2010) found that there is a well-documented marginalization of social studies in elementary classrooms, both tested and untested, largely because of the preoccupation with ELA and mathematics which carry the largest report card weight. In Adams et al. (2010) classroom teachers reported that their schools placed much less importance on social studies than other subjects such as reading and mathematics. In other research conducted by Leming, Ellington, and Schug, (2006), and McGuire, (2007) teachers from across the nation reported the disappearance of social studies from their classrooms as their schools institutionally de-emphasized the importance of social studies which stands to cause a narrowing of the social studies curriculum to the point of exclusion.

How can elementary educators teach marginalized content areas such as social studies and visual arts when they are spending most classroom time on teaching subjects on the high-stakes assessment (i.e., reading comprehension, mathematics, and science)? Perhaps an integrated curriculum for these two content areas might offer a solution (Brewer & Brown, 2009). Many teachers at the elementary level integrate social studies and literacy instruction, although sometimes the social studies content is lost in the process. Gallego, Hollingsworth, and Standerford (1995) suggested that the relationship between skill in literate processes and the learning of social studies content, however difficult to balance, is important enough to command the attention not only of elementary teachers, but of secondary teachers in all content areas, especially history and the social

sciences. Adams et al. (2010) found that integration was a way to address the marginalization of elementary social studies. Most participants in their study acknowledged that integration often is a double-edged sword. One professor commented, that on one hand it is a way to ensure social studies is taught, however, social studies content is often poorly integrated and not taught as a cohesive and rich subject. Another added that it was “important to teach them to pull it in where we can” (p. 9). Other instructors discussed how they had to help the students “sneak” social studies into the classroom. If social studies has a future, particularly elementary social studies, large-scale advocacy measures must be undertaken. This responsibility should fall on teacher educators, social studies specialists, social studies teachers, and all members of the National Council for the Social Studies. If we continue to leave elementary social studies behind, we may find ourselves without a foundation for our field (Adams et al., 2010).

**Socio-economic background.** Another factor that impact students’ achievement in social studies is their socio-economic background. Gassama (2012) stated that most people tend not to understand what poverty is and its devastating effects on families. When a family is embedded in poverty, the child’s education becomes the least on their scale of preference. For the family without resources, survival takes the front seat. It can be wrong, however, for anyone to embrace the belief that parents from poor families overlook their children’s education. The reality is that for them, keeping the children alive is of the utmost importance. At-risk children are those children that stand the likelihood of failing in school because of their socioeconomic conditions, but it can be wrong to single out any one factor as being paramount in making a child a failure in school. The likelihood for risk is prominent when a bunch of factors come together.

According to Leroy and Symes (2001), poverty is considered a major risk factor. Known factors that are related to poverty, and likely to make a child fail academically include: unemployment, homelessness, mobility, exposure to inadequate educational experiences, substance abuse, dangerous neighborhoods, malnutrition, poor health, exposure to environmental toxins, inadequate child care, lead poisoning, television watching, and birth weight (Gassama, 2012). Jenson (2009) declare that children in poverty are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance. He adds that “this reality does not mean that success in school or life is impossible. On the contrary, a better understanding of these challenges points to actions educators can take to help their less-advantaged students succeed” (pp. 13-14). It is difficult to develop positive relationships with parents of poor families and entice them to get involved in their children’s education. This is possible however, by first understanding what is involved in parenting in low socioeconomic conditions. Gassama (2012) observes that parent ability is weakened by living in poverty conditions and by the emotional and psychological stress associated with living in poverty. Jackson (2014) posits that child poverty is a fundamental injustice and that children cannot be held accountable for deprivations they may experience, and deficiencies of shelter, food, healthcare, and emotional care.

Kosar, Rebell and Wolff (2009) argue that middling test scores reflect a “poverty crisis” in the United States, not an “education crisis.” Adding union muscle to the argument, American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten calls poverty “the elephant in the room” that accounts for poor student performance. To prove that

poverty is the major factor driving America's meager academic achievement, at least two of the following three claims need to be established: 1. Poverty is related to lower levels of student learning. 2. America's poor students perform worse than other countries' poor students. 3. The poverty rate in the United States is substantially higher than the rates in countries with which it is compared. To the first claim, the answer is obviously in the affirmative. That is not to say poor children cannot learn. It is to say, rather, that there has long been a clear connection between families' socioeconomic status and students' academic achievement (Petrilli & Wright, 2016). Pawloski (2014) stated that poverty is more influential to academic performance than even gestational exposure to cocaine. Dotson and Foley (2016) studied student poverty and its impact on students' achievement as measured by standardized tests. They found that in every state in America the economically disadvantaged subgroup never outperforms other non-labeled students regardless of the grade level or subject area, supporting the idea that the variable with the strongest correlation to academic achievement is socioeconomic status. Financial stress can create toxic conditions in the home and makes it difficult, if not impossible, for parents to afford the tutoring, educational games, summer camps, afterschool activities, and other educational experiences that middle- class and upper-middle-class students take for granted and that almost surely boost their achievement (Petrilli & Wright, 2016).

But it is not just about money. Poverty is associated with a host of other social ills that have a negative impact on learning. According to Silvernail, Sloan, Paul, Johnson, and Stump (2014) while the level of poverty in a school is the single best predictor of student performance, other factors also play a role in influencing student achievement. Some of these factors include the type of school students are enrolled in, years of

teaching experience, and the education levels of teachers. Children in poverty are much more likely to be living in single-parent families headed by young, poorly educated mothers. Poverty is also associated with higher rates of alcoholism and other substance abuse in the home; greater incidence of child abuse and neglect; and heightened family involvement in the criminal justice system (Petrilli & Wright, 2016). Shields (1991) suggests that student learning is affected by three major factors: the school environment, the home or community environment, and the policies of the district and state. A thorough understanding of these factors is vital to closing the poverty achievement gap. Some families and communities, particularly in poverty-stricken areas, do not value or understand formal education. This leads to students who are unprepared for the school environment, which further leads to misunderstandings regarding student actions and speech by teachers due to variations in norms and values (Lacour & Tissington, 2011).

***Closing the poverty achievement gap.*** Numerous classroom specific strategies have been researched for effectiveness in closing the poverty achievement gap. Allington (1991) researched variations in classroom instruction for the purpose of locating specific instructional techniques which are effective in teaching literacy to at-risk children. Dell'Angelo (2016) states that low achievement does not have to be a foregone conclusion for children in poverty, but that teachers' perceptions of obstacles to student learning can make a difference for schools where poverty levels are high. Even in schools with high poverty, student achievement is higher when teachers perceive fewer obstacles.

Allington (1991) determined that a key to closing the poverty achievement gap is to assess students through multiple avenues, to go beyond standardized testing to include voluntary reading data, holistic assessments of real reading and writing, surveys of



parental satisfaction, and an analysis of the progress of all individuals toward academic goals. Poverty significantly affects the resources available to students. Due to this lack of resources, many students struggle to reach the same academic achievement levels of students not living in poverty (Silvernail, Sloan, Paul, Johnson, & Stump, 2014).

One approach that schools have used to close the achievement gap is augmenting the school day with after-school programs. Colón-Muñiz and Curwen (2013) studied one school's after-school program that provided impressive academic gains for students. Sunshine Elementary School is an independent charter school in southern California. Located in a high-poverty neighborhood with a high concentration of immigrant families, primarily from Mexico, this dual-immersion school's extended day program has evolved to seamlessly link the learning from the regular school day with creative enrichment experiences after school. This community K-8 school serves approximately 700 mostly Latino children of whom 80% qualify for the federal free-or reduced-lunch program and 70% are English language learners. The school has received numerous awards including state recognition for academic excellence. The success of the Sunshine Elementary School's afterschool program in dealing with the issue of poverty among its students shows that instructional techniques and strategies implemented at the classroom, school, district, and government levels can help close the achievement gap by providing students with necessary assistance to achieve high performance in academics (Lacour & Tissington, 2011).

**Parental involvement in school.** Parental educational involvement is a multifaceted construct that encompasses parents' educational involvement at home and at school as well as parents' academic socialization (Hill and Tyson 2009). Home-based

involvement includes any activities parents implement in the home that reinforce school-based learning, including monitoring homework completion, checking homework, and educational enrichment activities. School-based involvement entails parents' active involvement in the school setting through activities such as participating in school organizations, volunteering in the school, or communicating with teachers during parent-teacher conferences or other on-campus activities. Academic socialization encompasses indirect messages about school that communicate parents' educational expectations for the child and their views around the importance of education as well as the more concrete discussions in which parents directly promote the development of their children's future educational and occupational plans. Academic socialization allows parents to give their children the tools necessary for independence and educational success (Hill & Tyson 2009). According to Gould (2011) there is a relationship between parental involvement in education and student satisfaction with school-related activities, at the middle-school level. This satisfaction with school is reflected in higher performance and greater achievement.

Ducreax and Lam (2013) in their examination of the effects of parental influence on middle school students' academic achievement, found that there is a significant relationship between parental help and monitoring, press for literacy, and parents' highest level of education: the higher the level of education of parents, the more involved parents are. Low-income parents and less educated parents are more likely to express lower educational expectations for their children compared to more affluent parents (Carolan and Wasserman, 2015). They are also less likely, on average, to be involved in their

children's education, both at home and at school (Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Roksa & Potter, 2011).

Ducreax and Lam (2013) uncovered a relationship that approached significance between communication and academic achievement: as communication about school increased, academic achievement increased. Research done by Bowen, Glennie, Hopson, and Rose, (2012) also found that students' perceptions of their parents' expectations for their behavior was a significant predictor of improved performance. Thus, higher parental expectations for behavior in the sixth grade predicted better performance on tests at the end of the eighth grade (Bowen et al., 2012).

**Homework.** Homework activities are usually designed to reinforce classroom learning by allowing students time for independent practice. According to Bas, Cigerci, and Sentürk, (2017) while some homework assignments are given for instructional purposes, such as providing students with the chance of reviewing or practicing the material that has already been presented in the class, some may fulfil a school's mandates. The degree of choice refers to whether a homework assignment is voluntary or mandatory. Teachers today have a choice between traditional paper homework versus online. Epstein et al. (2015) discovered that students' homework behaviors (i.e., time spend on homework completion, time management, and amount of homework completed), are related to student academic achievement at each grade level.

Dodson (2014) in his study to determine whether online homework creates a measurable difference in student performance when compared to traditional, paper homework, found an increased student performance when utilizing paper homework. This may give support to explaining why most teachers still utilize this method. In

contrast, if the use of online homework increases or maintains student performance, it may justify a push toward a more online-based extension of student learning. Overall, the results for this study seem to indicate that online homework, at the very least, maintains student performance within the classroom. It is evident that homework does help to improve students' performance (Dodson, 2014; Epstein et al, 2015). Like homework completion, part of the problem of practice of students' low academic achievement in social studies has to do with social promotion.

**Social promotion.** Changes in 20<sup>th</sup> century school structure saw a movement from merit promotion to an adoption of social promotion. Social promotion is the practice of sending a student to the next grade regardless of whether they meet grade level expectation, to keep them with their peers (Hernandez-Tutop, 2012). This is opposed to retention, which is the act where a student repeats a grade if they fail to meet the minimum competency set by grade level expectations. Irby, Mawhinney, and Roberts, (2016) stated that to keep dropout rates low and continue to receive funding, schools adopted social promotion and consequently cause an increase in dropout while many students are pushed out of school without the necessary skills needed for them to live productive lives. Socially promoted students eventually hit an academic road block when they start a new grade, sometimes a full grade level beneath their peers. Tingle, Schoeneberger, and Algozzin (2012) state that these students face unique challenges, including mastery of previous material while simultaneously attempting to learn new material and that given their previously documented struggles, they will require additional attention and different instructional strategies.

Social promotion also shapes the learning opportunities of students who are up to academic par for their grade level as teachers who receive socially promoted students end up teaching to the level of the socially promoted students; this incessant “teaching down” does not help the promoted student catch up or focus on his or her needs (Irby et al, 2016). Eisner (2000) is of the view that ending social promotion makes common sense, but only if it is carried out thoughtfully and well. He suggested that plans to end social promotion should be seen as a broader strategy to reform and should include the use of multiple measures of achievement to determine promotion or retention, provide extended learning opportunities for students at-risk of being retained, restructuring the school day to provide more in-class support for students at risk of being retained, and provide more professional support and assistance to teachers and principals.

**Absenteeism.** School attendance can be an early indicator of when something is going wrong with a student (Steinberg, 2012). Gathering, analyzing and acting on attendance information is a first step toward school improvement (Chorneau, 2012). A growing body of data linking lower student performance in middle and high school with poor attendance in the lower grades has prompted new focus on truancy and chronic absenteeism nationwide. A 2011 study from Attendance Works, a nationally recognized anti-dropout group, found many schools that boast an average daily attendance rate in the mid-90s also had chronic absentee issues (Chorneau, 2012). While there are variations in what data states collect and how it is used, attendance information is a key common denominator.

Steinberg (2012) in studying the problem of absenteeism in California, states that frequently skipping school is like a gateway drug for students who end up completely

dropping out. He advocates for data collection on absenteeism and early intervention as the most effective ways of acknowledging and addressing the state's dropout crisis.

Gordon (2012) is of the view that the idea of the early warning system really stems from the realization that students disengage from school gradually. He further states that "students send signals that they are drifting away and we have the ability to track those signals, flag them for teachers and parents and give schools the chance to intervene" (p.27). According to Strong (2012) school attendance is one of those early indicators of when something might be going wrong - not just academically but in other phases of a child's life, too.

**Sports.** Another of the issues surrounding the low academic achievement in social studies is students' participation in sporting activities. Part of the problem of practice relates to the fact students who participate in sports often do not complete homework assignments, are absent from class the day after a game, or sleep in class. Athletics are an integral part of U.S. secondary school culture, with an over 55% participation rate nationwide (Camire, 2014). Barr-Anderson, Fox, Neumark-Sztainer, and Wall (2010) examined the associations between sports team participation, physical activity, and academic outcomes in middle and high school students. They found that for middle school students, the positive association between physical activity and GPA could not be separated from the relationship between sports team participation and a higher GPA. Regardless of whether academic success was related to the physical activity itself or to participation on sports teams, findings indicate positive associations between physical activity involvement and academic achievement among students. Bradley and Conway (2016) in studying the impact of sport and extra-curricular activities on students'

academic performance stated that although the type of sport practiced by the student may have the potential to influence non-cognitive skills and academic achievement, the higher level of conscientiousness displayed by athletes support higher levels of motivation to learn and a greater tendency to strive for achievement resulting in a greater benefit to academic achievement. Chen and Harklau (2017) conducted a longitudinal study involving Latino students and provided a counterpoint to those studies that find positive effects of extracurricular activities on individual academic attainment. Chen and Harklau (2017) assert that sports participation has a more complex influence, simultaneously presenting opportunities but also obstacles to school success. Their findings suggest that the effects of sports participation on Latino students' academic outcomes are not self-evidently positive but rather are mediated by individual and contextual factors.

**Motivation.** Stroet, Opdenakker, and Minnaert (2016) state that motivation is an important prerequisite for learning and possibly more than anything else, to be well equipped to deal with the modern societal demand for life-long learning, students need high, sustainable motivation. Dowson and McInerney (2003) emphasized that students can and do hold multiple social and academic goals in school settings. Students' academic goals may be defined as their academic purposes for wanting to achieve in academic situations while their social goals may be defined as their social purposes for wanting to achieve in academic situations. As such, students' motivational orientations may be expected to impact upon their academic behaviors and cognition in a wide variety of ways (Dowson & McInerney, 2003). Motivation is predictive not only of school achievement and school dropout (Hodis, Meyer, McClure, Weir, & Walkey, 2011) but also of the transfer of learning (Laine & Gegenfurtner, 2013) and persistence in learning

over time (Richmond, 1990). There are many school variables, such as national curriculum, reporting procedures, and/or cultural contexts that influence performance goals. In addition, achievement goals, as classically defined, may not reflect all of the adolescents' reasons for achieving in school (Lopes da Silva, Paulino, & Sa, 2016).

**Study skills and retention of content.** Definitions vary, but study skills are generally described as tools or systems used by students as aids for independent learning rather than classroom-based instructional strategies (Taylor & Wood, 2005). According to Taylor and Wood (2005) middle school students face complex and diverse content from math, science, language arts, social studies, foreign language, technology, and other coursework without the tools to sort through that material to discern that which is most valuable to them in test taking, and hence should be taught a variety of study skills. Ergen and Kanadli (2017) see self-regulated learning as an important aspect of study skills and posit that self-regulated learning strategies exhibit a substantial effect on students' academic achievement. Although more research is needed to examine how the various components of self-regulated learning have been applied to reading in the social studies classroom (Kumi-Yeboah, 2012) self-regulated learning has and is always applied in social studies reading content in the form of metacognition (Gourgery, 1998).

Self-regulatory processes promote achievement in the basic skills of reading in social studies content. Self-regulatory behaviors in reading include clarifying one's purpose, understanding meanings, drawing inferences, looking for relationships, and reformatting text in one's own terms (Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003). The concept of self-regulation has been correlated with academic achievement in learners and has become increasingly recognized as a major concept for cognitive psychologists in the



field of education. It is significant for educators to be aware of how self-regulated learning contributes to reading in social studies instruction (Kumi-Yeboah, 2012). Ergen and Kanadli (2017) recommend that pre-service and in-service teachers should learn how to implement these strategies in their lessons to increase their students' performance. Many students benefit from learning and using study skills that help them winnow the often-vast amount of information available to them. Research in this vein (Anderson, 1980; Ergen and Kanadli, 2017) supports the use of study strategies and suggests that students who know exactly what they are supposed to learn tend to outperform those who study without that specific focus.

Another important study skills is strategic note-taking (SN). According to Boyle (2011) no matter how technology changes, students will inevitably need to record notes in some shape or form so that they can have a permanent record of their classes. These notes will serve as study material as students prepare for tests and as reference material that students can access when they are completing assignments on similar topics or skills. Boyle (2011) found that students who used SN were more successful than traditional note-takers at recording more notes and exhibited better performance on the comprehension measure and long-term retention measure. Thorpe (2010) postulated that while many study skills are important for middle school students to know and apply to their academics, those that involve higher order thinking skills (such as SN) or a deeper level of processing are most beneficial to students.

**Student engagement and behavioral issues.** Another factor impacting student achievement in social studies is the level of school engagement, which influences students' behavior. Estell and Perdue (2013) observed that students' engagement in

school is an area of concern for many who are interested in promoting positive academic experiences in the lives of youth while minimizing negative developmental outcomes. School engagement may be of particular interest to researchers, not only because it is related to a variety of important developmental outcomes but also because it is believed to be malleable and therefore a potential target of interventions designed to minimize the negative outcomes mentioned previously while promoting school achievement and completion (Blumenfeld, Fredricks, & Paris, 2004). Furthermore, school engagement may represent an important focus for researchers seeking targets for early interventions, as levels of behavioral and cognitive engagement as early as third grade have been identified as predictors of potential dropout in high school (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). Finn (1989) argued that dropping out of school is a long-term developmental process and, as such, engagement in elementary school may be more influential in the ultimate decision to drop out than later experiences in adolescence.

Although there is a growing consensus that school engagement relates to a variety of important outcomes and that early levels of engagement may be of long-term consequence, there is a lack of consensus regarding what exactly constitutes school engagement (Estell & Perdue, 2013). Although no singular definition has been agreed on by the field as a whole, school engagement is repeatedly identified as comprising three components or three dimensions: cognitive, behavioral, and affective (or emotional) engagement (Blumenfeld, Fredricks, & Paris., 2004; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008). The definitions and subsequent measures of each of these three components are not uniform across investigations, but there are general similarities that

provide a framework for conceptualizing them. Cognitive engagement includes students' beliefs about themselves and others (e.g., self-efficacy, motivation, educational aspirations), and affective engagement is generally conceptualized as students' feelings toward their school, teachers, and classrooms (Campos, Greif, & Jimerson, 2003). Behavioral engagement consists of students' participation in learning tasks (inside and outside of the classroom), positive classroom conduct, and participation in extracurricular activities. Some investigators include markers of academic achievement (grades and achievement test scores) as elements of behavioral engagement, whereas others discuss academic achievement as an outcome related to (and not an element of) behavioral engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004, Jimerson et al., 2003). Student transition to middle school was also seen as an aspect of student engagement that was reflected in their behavior (Estell & Perdue, 2013).

**Reading strategies.** Students use a variety of literacy and comprehension skills to make meaning of what they read. These include contextual analysis and content vocabulary development. Berkeley, Marshak, Mastropieri, and Scruggs (2011) observe that as students progress through the grades, they face increasingly challenging and diverse types of text from which they must read and understand novel concepts. In addition, classrooms are becoming more inclusive of different types of learners, including struggling readers and students who have learning disabilities (LD) (Hock, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1999). This creates new challenges for teachers who need to provide adequate classroom instruction. Although content teachers may recognize that students need to be taught how to approach challenging reading tasks (e.g., reading a textbook), research has shown that many teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of these struggling readers

(Bryant, Linan-Thompson, Ugel, Hamff, & Hougen, 2001; Schumm & Vaughn, 1995). In social studies education, there is a challenge to make instruction more easily usable for students to read and comprehend content knowledge. The ultimate goal of reading in social studies is to comprehend and apply social studies content to life issues. The guiding principles for engaging in reading activities apply equally to textbooks, magazines, newspapers, or any other form of printed material. Teachers guide reading by activating prior knowledge and setting the purpose for reading. As students read content, teachers monitor comprehension by asking questions and clarifying concepts. Contextual analysis is used to understand new terms and integrate new information. Teachers give opportunities for students to think about what was read and summarize major concepts and details. This perspective suggests that differences in school performance might be related to the use of higher-order cognitive strategies (McBain, 2011).

Lisa Clark (2011) in her research *Reading in the Social Studies and Natural Science Content Area: A Phenomenological Study of the Beliefs, Attitudes, and Strategies Sixth and Seventh Grade Content Area Teachers Use to Teach below Grade Level Readers* found that content teachers tend to be more focused on teaching the content without direct reading instruction, believing instead that literacy skills are not necessary to learn. The practices of the content teachers who did not teach explicit reading skills in their classroom differ from the findings of Hiebert and Taylor (1994) who found that once a student gets off to a slow start, they will remain behind unless they receive direct literacy instruction. Adams, Carnine, and Gersten (1982) found that direct literacy instruction leads to improvement in performance. Jones (2007) found that for students to be successful in content area instruction, teachers should use literacy strategies associated

with reading in all content curricula. Gelzheiser, Hallgren-Flynn, Connors, and Scanlon, (2014) claim that a limited knowledge base is one cause of readers' poor comprehension and that the acquisition of vocabulary and knowledge is highly dependent upon reading. Students who avoid reading because of reading difficulties often fall further and further behind in their content knowledge and thus find reading even more challenging; differences in readers' knowledge and vocabulary produce "rich-get-richer and poor-get-poorer patterns of reading achievement" (Stanovich, 2008, p. 23).

**Instructional strategies.** Social studies teachers traditionally use a variety of instructional strategies with some yielding better results than others (Byford & Chiodo, 2004; Haladyna and Shaughnessy, 1985). These strategies include note-taking, direct instruction, textbooks, reading guides/worksheets, questioning, map activity, review, video presentations, and viewers' guide. However, Anderson and Cook (2014) posit that the challenges and stresses of covering an overwhelming amount of content has prompted teachers to adopt more teacher-centered instructional methods. Most commonly, teacher-centered instruction is textbook-driven, resulting in students developing negative attitudes towards social studies, as they are not engaged or experiencing any real-life connection to the material. This is concerning as secondary students are bored and have negative attitudes towards learning are at higher risk for school dropout (Anderson & Cook, 2014).

One criticism of most social studies classroom is a lack of differentiation (Byford & Chiodo, 2004). Differentiating instruction is a teaching strategy that uses multiple teaching methods to teach a concept. According to Harlin and Pavelock (2013) differentiating is as important for the educator as it is for the student. The goal of differentiating instruction is to reach the different types of learners in a mixed ability

classroom. The objective is for teachers to vary the way they teach the content that has been mandated by their state standards (Kelly, 2013). Birnie (2015) declares that differentiation is not a new fad, as some think; it has been in use by good teachers for years, and it will continue to benefit teachers as they serve students who vary in aptitude, attitude, learning styles, cultures, and prior knowledge. It does not demand an individual lesson plan for every student; indeed, among the most effective forms of differentiation are those that serve only three or four levels of learning in each class. And although it does demand intellect, skill, and commitment from even the best of teachers, it is not too hard, because its greatest reward (success for every student and the teacher) is worth the work (Birnie, 2015). Differentiation suggests that you can challenge all learners by providing materials and tasks at varied levels of difficulty with varying degrees of scaffolding, through multiple instructional groups, and with time variations (Tomlinson, 2000). Morgan (2014) points out that what we know now as differentiated instruction is based partly on Vygotsky's work in the 1970s and on Gardner's theory of various intelligences, published in 1983.

From the literature presented above, it is evident that there are many factors that affect students' performance in social studies and that relate to the Problem of Practice of low academic achievement in social studies among seventh grade students in a middle school in rural South Carolina. Consequently, research questions were formulated to determine whether a thematic unit on World War 1 and an integrated approach with its attendant differentiated instructional activities will improve students' motivation to learn social studies, improve their retention of social studies content, and increase their

academic performance in social studies through higher test scores. The review of literature will now focus on the impact of thematic units and integration on learning.

### **Thematic Units and Integration**

This section begins with an overview of the advantages of thematic teaching and integration, with research-based evidence. This is followed by a presentation of the ideological and theoretical frameworks of thematic units, supporting arguments in favor of thematic units and integration, as well as the specific ways in which literature and the arts are integrated with thematic teaching.

**Advantages of thematic units and integration.** The standard way to teach social studies is to start with the earliest events in time and proceed to the present. This approach has some advantages: moving chronologically helps students sequence events and allows them to understand what was happening in the country or around the world at a given time. The main drive behind teaching chronologically, however, is out of habit. We do it because that is the way textbooks are organized and that is how parents and students expect it (Metro, 2107). Organizing a curriculum by themes, on the other hand, allows students to develop an understanding of how issues develop over time. There is a dearth of research comparing outcomes of teaching social studies chronologically versus thematically. Yet, teaching thematically inspire greater intellectual curiosity, promotes deeper engagement with the past, and empowers students to find their own answers to the problems of society (Metro, 2017).

A study by Yorks and Follo (1993) suggests that students learn better from thematic, interdisciplinary instruction than from a traditional, single-subject curriculum.

The authors drew this conclusion from testing the engagement rates of 25 students

learning social studies, reading, and math in a mixed-age classroom of 3rd and 4th graders. Using an engagement rate observation form, students' self-perceptions, and teacher's assessments, the authors showed higher engagement rates during thematic instruction than during single-subject lessons.

A similarly positive result emerged from a study by Schubert and Melnick (1997). They investigated the effects on students of integrating the visual, performing, and musical arts within their Civics, English, History, and Geography classes. Their qualitative multiple-site study evaluated the integrated learning of students in 11 rural, suburban, and urban elementary, middle, and high schools. Their data showed that students made vivid connections among the various subject areas. They also found that incorporating curricular content in various intelligence areas offered new learning opportunities for students with difficulties in verbal or mathematical areas. The authors also concluded that this integrated curriculum increased students' positive attitudes toward school and their self-concepts.

**Theoretical framework.** Thematic units and integration are student-centered approaches that align with the learner-centered ideology of curriculum pedagogy (Schiro, 2013). They are well compatible with differentiated instruction and students are appropriately challenged, resulting in less boredom or feelings of overwhelming difficulty (Anderson & Cook, 2014). Loughran (2005) defines thematic teaching as “a process of integrating and linking multiple elements of a curriculum in an ongoing exploration of many different aspects of a topic or subject” (p. 3). Thematic teaching is about students actively constructing their own knowledge, drawing on real-life experiences and incorporating issues of social justice that they face in their everyday



lives. In classrooms where successful thematic work is in progress, ownership of learning is in the hands and minds of the students and children learn more from thematic, integrated teaching than from traditional single-subject curriculum (Loughran, 2005; Yorks & Follo, 1993).

Thematic teaching and integration are aligned to the constructivist theory of learning. Constructivists believe that it is impossible to isolate units of information or divide up knowledge domains according to a hierarchical analysis of relationships (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Theorists Piaget and Vygotsky were strong proponents of this constructivist approach. Piaget (1926) believed that knowledge is built in a slow, continuous construction of skills and understanding that each child brings to each situation as he or she matures. His development theory emphasized the cognitive growth that takes place when students cooperate and interact with one another. This process is enhanced by integration.

**Cognitive development theory.** Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development suggests that children move through four different stages of mental development. His theory focuses not only on understanding how children acquire knowledge, but also on understanding the nature of intelligence. Piaget's stages are:

Sensorimotor stage: birth to 2 years

Preoperational stage: ages 2 to 7

Concrete operational stage: ages 7 to 11

Formal operational stage: ages 12 and up

**Sensorimotor stage.** During this earliest stage of cognitive development, infants and toddlers acquire knowledge through sensory experiences and manipulating objects. A

child's entire experience at the earliest period of this stage occurs through basic reflexes, senses, and motor responses. At this stage children go through a period of dramatic growth and learning. They learn how to perform physical actions such as crawling and walking, as well as experience language development. Piaget believed that developing object permanence or object constancy, the understanding that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, was an important element at this point of development. By learning that objects are separate and distinct entities and that they have an existence of their own outside of individual perception, children are then able to begin to attach names and words to objects.

***Preoperational stage.*** The emergence of language that is one of the major hallmarks of the preoperational stage of development. Children become much more skilled at pretend play during this stage of development, yet still think very concretely about the world around them.

At this stage, kids learn through pretend play but still struggle with logic and taking the point of view of other people. They also often struggle with understanding the idea of constancy.

***Concrete operational stage.*** While children are still very concrete and literal in their thinking at this point in development, they become much more adept at using logic. The egocentrism of the previous stage begins to disappear as children become better at thinking about how other people might view a situation. Children at this point in development tend to struggle with abstract and hypothetical concepts. They also begin to understand that their thoughts are unique to them and that not everyone else necessarily shares their thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

**Formal operational stage.** The final stage of Piaget's theory involves an increase in logic, the ability to use deductive reasoning, and an understanding of abstract ideas. At this point, people become capable of seeing multiple potential solutions to problems and think more scientifically about the world around them. The ability to systematically plan for the future and reason about hypothetical situations are also critical abilities that emerge during this stage.

The students in this study are aligned to the formal operational stage (age 12 and up) of the Cognitive Development Theory. This means that they have the potential to think critically, reason deductively, and apply problem-solving skills to their work as well as the world around them. Given these propensities that students have, I believed that the application of a thematic unit as my intervention in this study, would have allowed students the opportunity to demonstrate these skills in real-world situations that a traditional approaches (that largely do not engage students) would not.

**Social development theory.** The work of Lev Vygotsky (1934) has become the foundation of much research and theory in cognitive development over the past several decades, particularly of what has become known as Social Development Theory. Vygotsky's theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978), as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of making meaning (McLeod, 2014). Thematic teaching and integration provide a great level of student interaction and community.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory is one of the foundations of constructivism. It asserts three major themes: social interaction, the more knowledgeable other, and the zone of proximal development.

Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. In contrast to Jean Piaget's understanding of child development (in which development necessarily precedes learning), Vygotsky felt social learning precedes development. He states: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the child (intra-psychological)" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 34). The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept. The MKO is normally thought of as being a teacher, coach, or older adult, but the MKO could also be peers, a younger person, or even computers. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the distance between a student's ability to perform a task under adult guidance and/or with peer collaboration and the student's ability solving the problem independently. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs in this zone.

Vygotsky focused on the connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences [3]. According to Vygotsky, humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environments. Initially children develop these tools to serve solely as social functions, ways to communicate needs. Vygotsky believed that the internalization of these tools led to higher thinking skills.

***Application of Vygotsky's theory.*** Many schools have traditionally held a transmissionist or instructionist model in which a teacher or lecturer 'transmits' information to students. In contrast, Vygotsky's theory promotes learning contexts in which students play an active role in learning. Roles of the teacher and student are

therefore shifted, as a teacher should collaborate with his or her students in order to help facilitate meaning construction in students. Learning therefore becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and teacher.

**Supporting literature.** According to Moyer (2016) the use of themes to organize instruction for students has been popular since John Dewey first proposed that curriculum be related to real-life experiences. Using broad themes (which students can help to formulate) students can apply their own real-life experiences thus making thematic teaching, also called interdisciplinary teaching or integrated instruction, a good vehicle for students to utilize otherwise fragmented knowledge and thought processes to help make connections and solve problems in the real world by involving other disciplines. Cognitive brain research supports the theory behind integrated instruction (Caine & Caine, 1994; Moyer, 2016). Studies have shown that the human brain struggles with isolated pieces of information that are not perceived to be important or relevant and that the brain seeks patterns to create meaning (Jenson, 2000) and naturally connects facts and ideas to make sense of the world. This pattern detection strength of the brain requires immersion in a context rich with details, emotional tones, and imagery. The very structure of thematic instruction serves to tie ideas together around a larger whole (theme, concept, and problem) (Davies & Shankar-Brown, 2011).

The more information and skills are separated from prior knowledge and experience, the more learning is dependent on the often-limited abilities of repetition and memorization. The extent to which schools can simplify or make logical the world's natural complexity and workings of the mind, the easier it is for the student to learn (Randle, 1997). Thematic teaching helps students stay focused and excited about what

they are learning. More current research has shown that thematic instruction can also play a key role in boosting student motivation and improving academic achievement (Davies & Shankar-Brown, 2011). Bhat, Hosapatna, Kotian, Souza, and Souza (2016) in researching the effectiveness of an integrated teaching program using student feedback, found that integrated teaching as an innovative method in strengthening the teaching-learning process received wide acceptance from the student population in the study. The study revealed that the average marks obtained by students after an integrated teaching approach was greater than the marks obtained by students after the conventional teaching methods. They found too that medical students trained with integrated curriculum were more accurate in diagnosis of clinical disorders than those trained in a conventional (non-integrative) curriculum.

As teaching time for social studies is reduced, an increased amount of time is spent on discussing how best to still teach the subject. Time and again integration of social studies with other subjects comes to the forefront (DeChano-Cook, 2012). Alleman and Brophy (1993) suggested that integration helps create content balance and natural, holistic learning while saving classroom time. They also proffer that by integrating subjects across the curriculum it is possible to teach knowledge and skills simultaneously, and enhance the meaning of what is taught. According to Lonning, DeFranco and Weinland (1998) the purpose of integration is to help students understand concepts in a larger context. Diem (1996) reported that when integration of social studies with other subjects occurred, students began to see and understand relationships among these subjects. Curriculum integration is an effective means of accomplishing the goal of teaching the content and skills children will need to solve the problems that occur in real

life and the interconnectedness of these occurrences. Compartmentalized academic disciplines and traditions have been the standard for centuries in lower schools as well as universities. This compartmentalization also permeates textbooks and standardized tests, which heavily influence and often dictate curriculum (McBee, 2000). According to Drake (2012) virtually any combination of subjects can be integrated given the will of the teachers involved. Interdisciplinary, or integrated curriculum, presents teachers with a broad scope for creativity and options that can provide limitless connections across subject areas. She adds that “to capture students’ interests, the curriculum should be set in the real world. Since the real world was not separated into disciplines neither should the curriculum be.” (p. 480). Curriculum integration facilitates making connections between skills, content, and life itself (McBee, 2000).

**Arts integration.** Arts integration involves learning core content subjects (math, reading, language, science, social studies) through the arts (drama, dance, music, visual arts). In a qualitative pilot study to examine and describe how the arts are integrated with curriculum concepts to promote cognitive development, Baker (2013) found that even instruction based on a standard course of study, can be guided by thematic objectives interwoven with the arts to yield rich and complex forms of learning for children that promote conceptual and intellectual development through their inter-relatedness to overall instructional concepts and objectives. Through arts integration, hierarchical implementation of instructional objectives including use of context and culture can be incorporated across instructional units to promote cognitive variables related to intellectual development (Baker, 2013). Santoli and Vitulli (2013) point out that given the research on the importance of visual literacy for the 21st century learner, it is

particularly relevant to social studies teaching and learning that arts integration improves students' critical thinking skills and promotes a deeper understanding of content.

Understanding, producing and responding to visual arts encourages students to engage in critical thinking skills, such as analysis, interpretation, reflection, and use of perspective, all of which are so valuable and necessary in the social studies (Kosky & Curtis, 2008; Crawford, Doherty, & Hicks, 2009).

**Literature integration.** This action research also seeks to integrate the use of children's literature or trade books as part of the thematic unit on World War One. Tindal (1996) points out that selecting literature to use for teaching social studies is no easy task. Books cannot be arbitrarily pulled off the shelves and used in place of the textbooks. Quality books must be chosen that reflect the social studies content. Bringing social studies textbooks to life has been a growing concern of educators. The use of general interest books, or trade books, can be a helpful means of supplementing the traditional textbook (DePriest, 1991). Fuhler (1992) reported that safe, noncontroversial social studies textbooks are neither meaningful nor necessary according to many students. As an alternative, teachers can integrate well-written trade books into the social studies curriculum. In a study to compare traditional methods of social studies teaching to a literature-based approach to teaching the same content as well as to compare attitude, achievement, and retention of social studies material, Tindal (1996) found a significant improvement in the attitude of students toward social studies as well as retention of content. The study results favor using a literature-based approach for increasing the retention of social studies content. Students who were taught using a literature approach rather than the textbook method began using the previous content learned, and students



began comparing and evaluating that data to new books and new content (Tindal, 1996). Wood and Jocius (2013) highlight the potential of children's literature integration to address cultural sensitivity and social justice issues in a way that marginalized groups (such as Black males) can relate to.

The preceding literature on thematic units and integration clearly shows the importance and benefits of these approaches to the improvement of students' learning and academic achievement. The potential of these methods to increase students' retention of content while addressing social justice and culturally relevant issues were highlighted as well.

### **Conclusion**

Seventh-grade students in a South Carolina middle school display low motivation to learn social studies, have low retention rates of social studies content, and perform poorly on social studies tests. In this chapter, I presented a comprehensive review of the literature as it relates to my stated problem of practice above. The nature of social studies and the numerous factors affecting students' achievement in social studies (the marginalization of social studies, students' socio-economic background, parental involvement in school, completion of homework assignments, student motivation, absenteeism, social promotion, involvement in extra-curricular activities, reading levels, behavioral issues/school engagement, study skills and retention of content, and instructional strategy), as well as the supporting literature relating to the research question of the impact of thematic teaching and integration, have been the focus of this literature review. In this chapter of my action research I presented a logical synthesis of supporting evidence and a set of defensible findings about the research question. The

literature review sought to observe all ethical considerations, including the avoidance of fallacious arguments, or any attempt to omit divergent evidence (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). In chapter three of my Dissertation in Practice I laid out the methodology that was used in conducting the study.

### **Key Words/Glossary**

This Dissertation in Practice was centered on the question of whether the use of a thematic unit and an integrated approach will improve student' academic achievement in social studies. The action research will be also conducted using students from a low socio-economic background. Below are the definitions of these terms as they are used in this action research.

**Thematic Unit.** A thematic unit is the organization of a curriculum around a central theme. It is a series of lessons that integrate subjects across the curriculum, such as math, reading, social studies, science, and language arts that all tie into the main theme of the unit. Each activity should have a main focus toward the thematic idea (Cox, 2017).

**Integration or Integrated Approach.** Educationally, integration is utilizing different subjects/content areas in teaching a topic or theme to increase student interest and engagement, help students to make connections, save time, address students' multiple intelligences, improve learning outcomes, remove fragmentation of learning, and aid in long term retention of content (Moyer, 2016).

**Motivation.** Motivation is the drive or desire to carry out an action. This desire may be from within (intrinsic), or it may develop because of external stimulation (extrinsic) (Cherry, 2016).

**Academic achievement.** This is the actual evidence of learning whether through formative, summative, or alternative assessment methods. It is the accomplishment and achievement of education through academic learning principles (Nugent, 2013).

**Socio-economic Status (SES).** This term relates to one's social and economic standing within a group as determined by income, education, occupation, access to resources and opportunities, as well as the amount of privilege that one has ((Adler et al., 2006).

**Trade Books.** These are children's literature books that are primarily designed to entertain and inform and can be used successfully in the classroom to heighten student motivation. Trade books can be aligned with objectives in such a way as to help students see the applicability of the topic (Pilinut Press.com).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter of my dissertation begins with an introduction to the chapter, followed by an outline of the research paradigm, methods, the research setting, population, intervention, the instruments for data collection, data collection methods addressing the issues of validity, data analysis, and the procedures. There is also a statement of ethical concerns, and the chapter ends with a conclusion which summarizes the information presented and sets the stage for chapter four.

This chapter of my action research focuses on a detailed outline of the methodology that I used to answer my research questions:

RQ 1: What is the impact of implementing a thematic unit on World War One on students' motivation to learn social studies?

RQ 2: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One have on students' perception of social studies?

RQ 3: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One have on students' performance on social studies unit test?

The purpose of the research was to ascertain the impact that implementing a thematic unit and integration will have on students' perception of, motivation to learn the content, and academic achievement in a seventh-grade social studies class at GBMS. As stated in chapter one of this DiP, the problem of practice relates to the lack of motivation,

low content retention, and poor achievement levels of seventh grade students in social studies in a Title 1 Middle School in rural South Carolina. Seventh grades students at GBMS (pseudonym) show a lack of motivation to learn social studies and perform poorly on summative assessments, including teacher made tests and quizzes, district benchmarks, and state standardized tests. Consequently, I strongly advocated that new teaching strategies be found to help students learn social studies and improve their level of achievement. This action research utilized a thematic unit of instruction as a strategy to improve students' motivation to do social studies, retention of social studies content, and academic achievement in social studies, as will be expressed in higher test scores.

The research was conducted in the normal course of everyday classroom pedagogy and was grounded in action research methodology. Mertler (2017) declares that “true school improvement must begin from within the proverbial ‘four walls of the classroom.’ Teachers must be able and willing to critically examine their own practice as well as how students (both collectively and individually) learn best” (p. 12). Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) postulate that meaningful teacher inquiry should become a part of the daily work that teachers perform. Traditionally, educational research is typically conducted by researchers who are outside the educational environment. This has resulted in the imposition of findings on schools and teachers with little or no attention paid to the varying localities and their specialized problems and needs. Hence the need for more classroom-based action research initiated and conducted by teachers for themselves (Mertler, 2017). The design of this classroom-based action research and the subsequent plan for implementation are outlined further in this chapter.

## **Design of the Study**

This section of the study outlines the philosophical underpinnings (paradigm) of the study, the methods, the setting of the study, the sample involved, the intervention that was done, the instruments and methods of data collection, as well as a detailed description of how the data was analyzed. The section also includes a statement of ethical consideration as well as a conclusion.

**Paradigm.** According to Patton (1990), a paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. Gubba (1990) adds that a paradigm is an interpretative framework, which is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. Morgan (2007) sees paradigm as one's worldview regarding research. A researcher's worldview will influence what he or she chooses to study as well as how he or she conducts the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study is rooted in the transformative and pragmatic worldviews of research. According to Creswell (2007) the transformative paradigm addresses marginalized individuals in society or issues of power and social justice, discrimination and oppression. The research in the transformative worldview links political and social action to these inequalities (Creswell, 2007).

Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy or reality. It applies to mixed method research in that the inquirers draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when they engage in their research (Creswell, 2007). Accordingly, the mixed method design (which is the design used in this action research) lends itself more to the pragmatic worldview of research.

**Methods.** As stated earlier, the design of the study aligns with action research methodology and is outlined in this section. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) declare that:

Once a teacher-inquirer has selected a focus for his or her work, defined a wondering to pursue, and located himself or herself within one of the inquiry support structures, the next step in the journey is learning about data collection and developing a plan for the study. (p. 85)

To fulfil the requirements in conducting the action research within a six to eight-week period, and to answer the research question, I used a convergent mixed-method design, collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. The action research sought to answer the question of the impact that a thematic unit on World War One will have on students' perception of, and motivation to learn social studies, retention of social studies content, and achievement levels in social studies in a seventh-grade classroom in a Title 1 middle school in rural South Carolina.

**Setting.** The action research focused on the seventh-grade students at GBMS (pseudonym) a small Title 1 school located in rural South Carolina. The school is in a small town of 959 people (US Census Bureau, 2017) with a declining population of negative (-) 7.9% since 2000. The community is 62% black, 35% white and less than 2% Hispanic. The school is in a high poverty, low income neighborhood with a school population of 169 students (2018 - 2019 enrollment from PowerSchool) in grades six, seven, and eight. The seventh grade has an enrollment of 54 students. The middle school occupies one hall of the high school and shares cafeteria, gym, and other common areas with it. The school population is 98% black with about 2% whites and Hispanic

combined. One hundred percent of students receive free meals. The community in which the school is located, is physically segregated into a predominantly white neighborhood and a black neighborhood. Most white students attend the white private academy, while the black students attend the public-school system comprising one early childhood center, one elementary, one middle, and one high school. The school is in the area referred to as the I-95 “Corridor of Shame” (Ferillo, 2006), an area along Interstate 95 that is comprised by troubled public schools, health and social service disparities, insufficient infrastructure, a limited tax base, fractured local leadership, and spotty economic development.

The school offers the core curriculum subjects of mathematics, ELA, social studies, and science. In addition, electives are offered, namely, art, dance, Spanish, keyboarding, physical education, robotics, band, and chorus. Students participate in sports such as football, track and field, basketball, baseball, softball, and cheerleading.

**Sample.** The research utilizes a convenience sampling technique. The study sample consisted of 40 seventh-grade students, 15 males and 25 females. Students were divided into two school-determined intact groups, a control group of one class period totaling 14 students and a treatment group of one class period of 26 students.

**Intervention.** The total period of data collection lasted approximately four weeks and was conducted in the fall of 2018. Seventh-grade students were divided into two intact school-determined groups. The control group of 14 students were taught by the regular social studies teacher using traditional social studies teaching methods such as textbook reading, lecture, anchor charts, worksheets, videos, and maps. They were assessed also in traditional ways using quizzes and tests. The actual thematic unit on



World War One was covered in a two-week period. The first of the four-week data collection period was dedicated to the collection of data through the attitude towards social studies survey, subject preference survey, and the pre-test on World War One. In weeks two and three the treatment group of 26 students were taught using a thematic unit and integration with the core content areas of mathematics, ELA, and science along with music, art, and literature. Along with tests and quizzes, the treatment group was also assessed using non-traditional assessment such as performance assessment on different tasks, as well as observation.

Ten lessons on the thematic unit were taught for one hour per day (for two weeks) to the treatment group (comprising of 26 students). The topics are outlined in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1

*Alignment of Lessons to SC Social Studies Standard Indicators*

Lesson #	Topics	Standard indicator
1	Introduction Causes: Militarism, Alliances, Nationalism	7-4.1
2	Causes: Imperialism, Assassination	7-4.1
3	Key events	7-4.1
4	New inventions	7-4.1
5	Casualties	7-4.1
6	America's entry	7-4.1
7	End of the war/Treaty of Versailles	7-4.2
8	The League of Nations	7-4.2

Lesson #	Topics	Standard indicator
9	The World Changes/New Countries Created	7-4.2
10	American Isolationism/Rebuilding	7-4.1, 7-4.2

The unit will be integrated with the other core subjects of mathematics and science, as well as art, music, and literature as shown in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2

*Integrated Unit on World War One*

Art	Math	Science	Music	ELA	Literature/Drama
Draw a diagram of the trenches of World War One.	Plot a graph of the casualties of World War One.	Research the different components of poison gases	Learn the song “Over There”	Write a poem or short story on World War One.	Read the book “ <i>Hero Over Here: A Story of World War I</i> ” by Kathleen Kudinski. Discuss.
Draw an invention that could solve a problem in World War One.	Measure distances using scales on a map.	Research and report on the disease called trench foot.	Compose a song or rap about World War One.	Define each term in the acrostic: MANIA, as the causes of World War One.	Role play the nature of alliances through friendships/gangs
Create a cartoon of the Allied Powers forcing the terms of the Treaty of Versailles on Germany	Create a math game on World War One.	Research the reason for the flu epidemic after World War One.		Do a quick write/journal entry on each day’s lesson.	

Art	Math	Science	Music	ELA	Literature/Drama
Color a map of Europe showing the alliances before the war.	Research the dimensions of a U-boat and create a drawing to scale.			Write a letter to the president or congress on the negative consequences of war.	
Color a map of Europe to show the new countries that were created after the war.				Write an article outlining the reason(s) for American isolationism after World War One.	

Seeing that my new job assignment did not allow me to be in the classroom on a full-time basis, I went in everyday for the two-week period that the unit lasted to teach the lessons on the thematic unit to the treatment group. I also engaged in observation and recording of data in an ongoing process of data analysis. At the end of the two-week period, students completed the post-test on World War One. In week four, I re-administered the survey of subject preference and Likert scale of students' attitude towards social studies to the treatment group only. I also conducted the semi-structured interviews based primarily on the results of the post-test. I also used this time to get information and as a follow up to the students' surveys, to clarify data from observations, as well as to discuss students' attitude towards the thematic unit. Both quantitative and qualitative data gathered were analyzed and represented through tables, charts, and graphs, utilizing measures of central tendency and dispersion, descriptive and inferential statistics, and qualitative descriptions.

**Data collection instruments.** Multiple sources of data collection were employed, including a survey of students' subject preferences, a Likert rating scale of students' attitude towards social studies, an identical pre- test and post-test on the unit of study on World War One, as well as observations and semi-structured interviews. These instruments are placed in Appendix A, B, C. and D respectively at the end of the dissertation.

The survey of subject preferences consisted of five close-ended questions included questions on students' favorite and least favorite subjects and why. Students were presented with a list of subjects to choose from by checking the relevant box(es). The options of 'none' or 'other' were also included in their choices. To answer why they choose the particular subject(s) as their favorite, students were given close-ended responses to choose from, with options as well.

A Likert rating scale assisted in gauging students' perception of, attitude towards social studies, and their motivation to do the subject. This data gave me further insight as to the possible reasons why they do poorly on assessments. Students responded to statements regarding their degree of like or dislike of social studies by giving the level of agreement to the statements on the Likert- scale, choosing from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. Like the subject preference survey, the Likert- scale survey was administered to both the control and treatment groups prior to the beginning of the unit of instruction and to the treatment group after the completion of the unit. Both instruments were pilot tested with students outside the study sample prior to their implementation in the study and found to valid.

An identical pre-test and post-test of 33 multiple choice questions was administered to both the control and treatment groups using questions on the unit on World War One. These questions were taken from a combination of sources (USA Testprep, Mastery Connect, and the SC Social Studies Support Document) which are aligned to the South Carolina Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (SC PASS). This alignment to the state standards ensures the validity of the tests. In addition, the other social studies teacher reviewed the test to ensure that it measured students' knowledge of World War One as outlined by the state standards. This further added validity to the instrument.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subgroup of the treatment group after the post-test had been administered. A purposive sampling technique was used. According to Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2015) the purposive sampling technique is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities that the participant possesses and who will better be able to assist with the relevant research. A purposive sample (comprising the nine highest and the eight lowest scoring students on the post-test) was interviewed to obtain qualitative data on the perceived reason(s) for their performance and their opinions on the effectiveness of the thematic unit. The interview protocol consisted of five open-ended questions and follow up questions were asked as needed based on students' responses. Like the subject preference and the attitude towards social studies surveys, the semi-structured interview protocol was also pilot tested before it is administered in the study. Table 3.3 below shows the alignment between the research questions and the data collection instruments.

Table 3.3

*Alignment of Data Collection Instrument to Research Questions*

Research Question	Instrument	Description
RQ 1: What is the impact of implementing a thematic unit on World War 1 on students' motivation to learn social studies?	Subject preference survey.	Five close-ended questions
	Attitude towards social studies survey.	Likert scale
RQ 2: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War 1 have on students' perception of social studies?	Semi-structured interview protocol.	Five open-ended questions (follow-up questions as needed)
RQ 3: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War 1 have on students' performance on social studies unit test?	Pre-test Post-test	Identical unit test of 33 multiple-choice questions.

**Data collection methods.** Prior to the implementation of the thematic unit, both the control group and the treatment group completed a teacher-created and pilot tested survey of student subject preferences. The results provided an insight as to the number of students who regard social studies as their most, or least favorite subject. I also gleaned an awareness into whether students' preference or lack thereof may have a bearing on their levels of motivation to do and retain social studies content, as well as their low achievement in social studies. Students completed a Likert scale survey on attitude towards social studies before and after the implementation of the thematic unit. Results of

the subject preference and attitude towards social studies surveys (both pre- and post-treatment) provided valuable data for comparing students' level of motivation prior to the treatment as well as after. The data gathered from the subject preference survey were presented visually in the form of a table using numbers and percentages to represent students' responses, as well rich descriptive narrative.

Prior to the treatment (the thematic unit) students completed a 33-question multiple choice pre-test. After the treatment was applied, both groups did an identical post-test on the unit. Students' scores on the pre-test and post-test gave an indication as to the impact of the thematic unit on their motivation, retention of content, and achievement on a social studies unit test. The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the unit to members of the treatment based on their performance on the unit test on World War One. The interviews will also provide follow up data to the observations and to seek clarifications regarding the results of the surveys. The methods of data analysis are outlined further in this chapter of the DiP.

**Validity.** Mertler (2017) defines validity as the implementation of a study in such a way that the data received did in fact measure what it was supposed to measure. He claims that even though data that one might collect may be entirely accurate, the critical factor is whether or not it is appropriate and accurate for the purpose for which it was intended. Validity then means if the data accurately answer your research question. Citing the work of Galileo, Helskog (2014) suggests that data, though valid, may or may not be justified as such by accepted authority but that does not disprove validity. The problem of justifying action research, then, persists as a core problem to everyone claiming to do

action research and that justification to some extent needs to include convincing others that it is valid (Helskog, 2014).

Action researchers should be most concerned with evidence of validity based on instrument content (Mertler, 2017). To address the issue of content validity, the instruments used to collect the data (the subject preference survey, the attitude towards social studies survey, as well as the pre-test and post-test) related specifically to the constructs being measured, which were students' motivation to learn social studies, perception of social studies, and achievement on a social studies unit test, and did not include extraneous, or irrelevant, materials and questions. Surveys were pilot tested with other students prior to their implementation in the study and test items were drawn from the content support document that the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) provides. The regular social studies teacher also reviewed the items on the pre- and post-test as an added measure of validity. Pilot testing of the semi-structured interview protocol also add validity to this instrument for collecting qualitative data.

**Data analysis.** This action research was based on a convergent mixed-method design that collected and assessed both qualitative and quantitative data at the same time (Creswell, 2007). To help in the analysis of data provided through the subject preference survey, the Likert-scale survey of attitude towards social studies, as well as data from the pre-tests and post-tests of both control and treatment groups, I used descriptive and inferential statistical measures and sought to address the four principles of qualitative validity (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability).

**Descriptive statistics.** Descriptive statistics are mathematical procedures that serve to simplify, summarize, and organize relatively large amounts of numerical data



(Mertler, 2017). They are used to describe the basic features of the data in a study, providing simple summaries about the sample and the measures. In conjunction with simple graphics analysis, they form the basis of virtually every quantitative analysis of data (Trochim, 2006). As was appropriate, I used measures of central tendency (mean, mode, and median) to represent with a single score, what is typical or standard about the treatment and control groups. These measures of central tendency helped me to compare and establish similarity not just with individual performances within their given group but to make comparison between the control and treatment groups. Measures of dispersion (the range and standard deviation) provided results on what was different within the groups (Mertler, 2017) and yielded valuable results in the analysis of data. In addition, I used visual display of data through frequency distribution tables, bar graphs, and bell curves to represent students' test data.

***Inferential statistics.*** Inferential statistics were used to reach conclusions that extended beyond the immediate data alone. Researchers use inferential statistics to try to infer from the sample data what the population might think, or to make judgments of the probability of whether an observed difference between groups is a dependable one, or one that might have happened by chance. Thus, we use inferential statistics to make inferences from our data to more general conditions (Trochim, 2006).

To establish statistical significance between the means of the control and treatment groups' post-test results, I employed the use of an independent-measures t test. With an alpha level of 0.05, which is typical for educational research (Mertler, 2017), I calculated the p-value to ascertain if the differences in means were results of chance or if the treatment of a thematic unit was effective in improving students' perception of, and

motivation to learn social studies, retention of social studies content, and academic achievement on a social studies unit test, when compared to the traditional approach to teaching the subject. Both the paired t-tests (to make comparison within each group) and the independent t-test (to compare the control and treatment groups) were computed in Excel using formulas within the software program and that were also verified by data specialists at the University of South Carolina's Statistics Laboratory.

***Qualitative data.*** Analysis of qualitative data from the use of semi-structured interviews and observations is richly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This type of data helped in garnering greater insight into students' attitude and performances and the underlying features of these behaviors, rather than focusing purely on numerical data from test scores and other quantitative measures. Even though qualitative data involve more writing than quantitative methods, the final product is rich and more insightful (Lincoln, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Seventeen students were interviewed. The responses were transcribed and analyzed using key words and common phrases to categorize students' responses. A Structural Coding technique (Saldana, 2009) was used to assist in determining how to categorize students' response. According to Saldana (2009) "Structural Coding is perhaps more suitable for interview transcripts than other data such as researcher-generated field notes, but open-ended survey responses are also appropriate with this method" (p. 80).

Students gave very short responses that did not allow for the identification of themes, but those responses were compared based on: personal reflections on the thematic unit, impact of the unit on students' learning, comparison of the thematic unit

with traditional approaches, and impact of the unit on students' perception of social studies.

**Rigor and trustworthiness.** To strengthen the quality of the research, the results of the surveys and interviews were shared with the participants as appropriate to determine whether the data accurately depict their point of view as expressed during the interview and by my observations. This measure helped to establish the credibility of the data. I also was engaged in a thorough job of describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. There was careful observation and planning for the documentation of the changes that would have taken place with the setting, participants, or treatment conditions during the study. There were, however, no changes to any of these conditions throughout the study. There was also documented procedures for checking and rechecking the data throughout the study. A data audit was conducted to examine the data collection and analysis procedures and make judgments about the potential for bias or distortion.

From the quantitative and qualitative data analysis measures outlined in this section, I was able to develop a clear path to understanding the causes of my stated problem of practice and to determine the effectiveness of the treatment provided (an alternative strategy utilizing a thematic unit and integration of a social studies unit on World War One with other content areas) on the motivational levels, perception, and increased academic achievement on a social studies unit test.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics is defined as norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Resnick, 2013). It is a systematic approach to understanding,

analyzing, and distinguishing matters of right and wrong, good or bad, and admirable and deplorable as they relate to the well-being of and relationship among sentient beings (Rich, 2013). Ethical considerations in research have to do with ensuring that research participants are treated in a way that will not compromise their safety and well-being, physically or psychologically. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) maintain that caring, fairness, openness, and truth are critical aspects of ethical research and when teachers engage in the process of inquiry, they are engaging in a process that is a natural and normal part of what good, ethical teaching is all about. Nevertheless, it is imperative that all steps be taken to remove any semblance of unethical practice from one's action research. It is the action researcher's prerogative to make sure that his or her action research adheres to ethical standards (Mertler, 2017). Good action research embraces ethical considerations, not shy away from them (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

In keeping with the recommendations of what good ethical practices are in action research, I ensured that every step was taken to guarantee that my action research did not in any way deceive, embarrass, harm, denigrate, or suppress any of my student-participants. My aim was to uphold to the highest degree the three basic ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (The Belmont Report, 1979). Honesty, confidentiality, and anonymity were maintained throughout the action research process and beyond. I ensured that I obtained approval from the university's Institutional Review Board and that the policy regarding action research was adhered to. Even though the action research was conducted in the normal, day to day operations of the classroom, I was committed to the "principle of accurate disclosure" (Mertler, 2017) with the use of informed consent forms, parent consent forms, and assent forms to students, as was

appropriate. At no time were students' real name used on any data that will be published. I also used pseudonyms for the research site and did not use district name. Data collected were kept secure by being looked away in a cabinet. A coding system was used to match students and their data to protect anonymity.

Except when necessary, as in the case of stating statistical data that are easily verifiable through calculation (mean, mode, median, standard deviation) I did my best to avoid broad and sweeping generalizations that cannot be defended or are open to individual interpretation. This is on the advice of Mertler (2017) who cautions that when the researcher reports his findings and the subsequent implications of his research, he must be tentative, as it is not ethical to present any conclusions with absolute certainty.

### **Summary**

The problem of lack of motivation to learn social studies, low retention of social studies content, and low performance on standardized social studies tests among seventh grade students at the Green Branch Middle School (pseudonym) in rural South Carolina is a cause for concern. This action research aimed at seeking to implement a thematic unit as an alternative strategy to the traditional methods of instruction, and I hoped that this would prove effective in improving students' perception of, and motivation to learn social studies, retention of social studies content, and increase test scores in social studies at GBMS. The convergent mixed-method action research methodology outlined in this chapter allowed me to collect and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data on the effectiveness of a thematic unit on World War One and I hoped that by extension this strategy could be applied to other units of studies in social studies to boost students'

motivation and academic performance in the subject. In chapter four, a detailed analysis of the data that were collected will be presented along with the findings from the analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The problem of practice for this action research surrounds the fact that seventh-grade students at Green Branch Middle School (pseudonym), a Title 1 School located in rural South Carolina, display a lack of motivation to do social studies leading to declining academic achievements in the subject. Thus, as a teacher/school this presents a problem as reflected in low performances on classroom assessments, district benchmarks, as well as state standardized tests. South Carolina State Department of Education (SCDE) test data shows that in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 only 60.6%, 57.7%, 57.5% and 54.8% respectively, of seventh grade students at the school met or exceeded state standards on the South Carolina Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (SCPASS). As an action researcher reflecting on my own practice, I was thus led to devise a new strategy (a thematic unit and an integrated approach) to combat this apparent lack of motivation to work and to seek to improve students' academic achievement on a social studies unit test so that by extension, one hundred percent of students will achieve Met or Exemplary on the state standardized test.

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact that the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, would have on students' attitude towards social studies, their perception of the subject, and their academic achievement in a middle school seventh-grade social studies class. In utilizing a thematic approach, the students received multiple opportunities to learn and respond to social

studies content across different subject areas. Consequently, I believe that students' attitude, perception of, and motivation to learn social studies would increase, along with their ability to retain social studies content, which would result in an increase in their academic achievement through higher test scores.

When students become interested in a topic that is taught in more than one subject, they are more likely to be motivated to pay attention in these various classes and have a desire to learn (Lee, 2007). The thematic unit exposed students to a variety of activities done across subject areas, and they received the opportunity to demonstrate learning in multiple ways. I believed that the use of a thematic unit and integration would provide such meaningful learning experiences as to reduce class disruptions, increase student engagement, and address the multiple modalities of learning.

Johnson (2014) wrote that South Carolina's rural, impoverished school districts along I-95 are collectively known as the "Corridor of Shame," because of how poorly the dilapidated schools perform in the region. The middle school featured in this action research is found in the general region that Johnson (2014) described as the "Corridor of Shame." There is also the belief that race is an integral part of this delineation as the areas are predominantly African American communities that have suffered from an apparent institutionalized neglect, as well as generational poverty (Johnson, 2014).

This action research may be of significance in addressing the issues of social justice surrounding the neglect of the schools in the delineated area known as the "Corridor of Shame." The injustice of child poverty is a fundamental one. Children in poverty are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine



good school performance. I hope that the findings from this action research will reflect a significant improvement in students' perception of, and motivation to learn social studies, a greater retention of social studies content, and an increased academic achievement in seventh-grade social studies at GBMS. I believe that this action research will be of significance to educators of students who share similar characteristics as the population in the study. These findings can then be replicated in similar schools and eventually add to the body of social studies best practices.

The impetus for the current study came from my own observations of students who show an apparent lack the motivation to learn or retain information in social studies and have low academic achievement levels in the subject. To create greater continuity from one social studies topic to another, this action research collected data that was used to address the following research questions:

RQ 1: What is the impact of implementing a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, on students' motivation to learn social studies?

RQ 2: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, have on students' perception of social studies?

RQ 3: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One have on students' performance on a social studies unit test?

### **Results of Survey of Students' Subject Preference - Control Group (Before Intervention)**

A survey of student subject preference was administered to both the control group and the treatment Group. The survey was designed to determine students' attitude towards and perception of social studies as indicators of their motivation to do well in the

subject. The survey consisted of 5 questions close-ended questions. For each question students were asked to place a check beside a given set of response choices, with the option of “other” being included.

For question 1, students were given a list of subjects and they were asked to place a check beside their favorite subject. As shown in Table 4.1 below, six students (43%) chose science as their favorite subject, four (29%) students chose mathematics, three (21%) stated that social studies was their favorite subject, and one student (7%) chose ELA. No student chose “Other” than the core content subjects as their favorite.

Table 4.1

*Favorite Subjects for Students in the Control Group*

Subject	Number of students	Percentages
Science	6	43
Mathematics	4	29
Social Studies	3	21
ELA	1	7
Other	0	0
Total	14	100

On question 2 of the survey, students were asked to check their least favorite subject from the same given list. As shown in Table 4.2, seven students (50%) chose mathematics, four student (29%) chose ELA, two students (14%) chose social studies as their least favorite subject, and one student (7%) chose science. None of the students chose outside of the four core content areas.

Table 4.2

*Least Favorite Subject for Students in the Control Group*

Subject	Number of students	Percentages
Mathematics	7	50
ELA	4	29
Social Studies	2	14
Science	1	7
Other	0	0
Total	14	100

On question 3, students were asked the reason for choosing their favorite subject. They were given set choices with the added option to choose “Other.” They could also choose multiple responses. Their responses are outlined in Table 4.3. Seven students (50%) stated that their favorite subject is interesting, six students (43%) mentioned that their teacher makes it fun for them to learn, and one student (7%) stated that he chose his favorite subject because it aligns with his career choice. No student chose the option of “Other.”

For question 4 of the survey, students could choose multiple responses. For this question students were asked to check their reason for choosing their least favorite subject. As shown in Table 4.4 below, five students (36%) stated that their least favorite subject is boring, two students (14%) chose that there were too many assessments in the form of tests and quizzes, one student each (7%) felt that they cannot relate to the subject and that they are not given multiple opportunities to express their learning, respectively.

Table 4.3

*Students' Reason for Choosing their Favorite Subject – Control Group*

Response	Number of Students	Percentages
I find it interesting	7	50
My teacher makes it fun to learn	6	43
It aligns with my career choice	1	7
Other	0	0
Total	14	100

None of the student checked that their least favorite subject did not align with their career choice, and five students (36%) chose “other.” Those who chose “Other” included the two students who stated that social studies was their least favorite subject.

Question five required students to give advice to the teacher of their least favorite subject by checking one or more of the choices that were given. A total of 8 students (57%) chose “no advice” to give to the teacher of their least favorite subject. This includes the two students who chose social studies as their least favorite subject. Three students each (21%) stated that their teacher needs to use more technology and make the lesson more relatable to their daily lives, respectively. Two students (14%) chose that the teacher should vary the teaching strategy and one student (7%) felt that the teacher should ask him what he wants to learn.

Based on the analysis of the student subject preference survey, social studies does not seem to be of high preference to students in the control group.

Table 4.4

*Students' Reason for Choosing the Least Favorite Subject – Control Group*

Response	Number of students	Percentages
The lessons are boring.	5	36
Too many tests and quizzes.	2	14
I cannot relate to this subject.	1	7
I am not given multiple opportunities to express my learning	1	7
It does not align with my career choice	0	0
Other	5	36
Total	14	100

Interestingly, when asked “What advice would you give to the teacher of our least favorite subject?” those who chose social studies as their least favorite subject chose “No advice” to give to the teacher in terms of ways that could help to motivate them to do well in the subject. Overall, there does not seem to be a high level of enthusiasm towards social studies, with only three students (21%) choosing the subject as their favorite. This level of indifference could impact students’ motivation to learn the subject content and to do well academically in social studies.

#### **Results of Survey of Students’ Subject Preference - Treatment Group (Before and After Intervention)**

The identical survey consisting of 5 questions was administered to the treatment group before and after the thematic unit was administered. This instrument was designed

to gauge students' attitude towards, and perception of social studies, as indicators of their motivation to do well in the subject. Students were required to put a check beside their desired response from the list of responses that was given.

On question one, students were asked to check their favorite subject. As shown in Table 4.5 below, before the thematic unit, 10 students (38%) chose social studies as their favorite compared to eight (31%) who chose mathematics, three (12%) who chose science, and 5 (19%) chose "other." No student chose ELA as their favorite. After the thematic unit 10 students (38%) still chose social studies as their favorite, compared to six (23%) for mathematics, three (12%) for science, one, (4%) for ELA, and six students (23%) choosing "other."

A greater percentage of students (38%) in the treatment group chose social studies as their favorite subject both before and after the thematic unit than in the control group where (21%) chose the subject. This seems to be purely by chance as the regular teacher teaches both groups using the traditional methods. Of the 10 students who chose social studies as their favorite subject before the thematic unit was administered, eight indicated that it was still their favorite subject after the unit. Two students who chose social studies before the unit switched to another subject, while two who did not originally choose social studies before the unit, did so after the thematic unit was administered. Seeing that the social studies numbers did not change from the pre-test to post-test, the thematic unit did not make any appreciable changes in students' favorite subject preference in the treatment group.

On question two, students were asked to place a check beside their least favorite subject from the list that was given, with the option to choose "other."

Table 4.5

*Favorite Subjects for Students in the Treatment Group*

Subject	Before Thematic Unit		After Thematic Unit	
	# of students	(%)	# of students	(%)
Social studies	10	38	10	38
Mathematics	8	31	6	23
Science	3	12	3	12
ELA	0	0	1	4
Other	5	19	6	23
Total	26	100	26	100

As shown in Table 4.6, science was the least favorable subject before and after the thematic unit was administered, with 10 students (39%) before and 13 (50%) after. Six students (23%) chose math as their least favorite before the unit and five students (19%) after. Before the unit, six students (23%) stated that ELA was their least favorite subject, but this number decreased to three students (12%) after. The number of students who chose social studies as their least favorite subject remained at four (15%) after the unit on World War One was presented. One student chose another subject other than the core content areas as her favorite after the unit was presented.

Two of the students who chose social studies as their least favorite before the unit, chose another subject after the unit, while two other students who did not originally choose social studies as their least favorite subject, did so after the unit. The fact that the numbers did not change, however, suggests that the thematic unit did not change students' perception of social studies in terms of their least favorite subject.

Table 4.6

*Least Favorite Subject for Students in the Treatment Group*

Subject	Before Thematic Unit		After Thematic Unit		
	# of students	%	# of students	%	
Science	10	39	Science	13	50
Mathematics	6	23	Mathematics	5	19
ELA	6	23	Social studies	4	15
Social studies	4	15	ELA	2	12
Other	0	0	Other	1	4
Total	26	100	26	100	

For question 3, students were asked to indicate the reason for choosing their favorite subject by checking one or more of the responses that were given. Before the thematic unit was completed, an equal number of students 10 (38%) indicated that they found the subject interesting, and that the teacher makes it fun to learn, respectively. For four students, their favorite subject aligns with their career choice, while five students (19%) chose “other” as their reason. After the unit, 10 students (38%) indicated that their favorite subject was interesting, six students (23%) each stated that the teacher makes it fun to learn, it aligns with their career choice, and “Other”, respectively.

As shown in Table 4.5 above, 10 students chose social studies as their favorite subject both before and after the thematic unit was administered. Table 4.7 below shows students’ response to question four regarding the reasons for choosing social studies as their favorite subject. Students could choose multiple responses. Before the thematic unit



was done six of the ten students (60%) stated before the thematic unit that the teacher makes it fun to learn social studies. This declined very marginally to five (50%) after the unit. Three of the ten students (30%) indicated that social studies was their favorite subject because they found it interesting. This number increased to four (40%) after the unit. One student (10%) indicated that social studies aligns with his career choice, after the unit was administered.

Table 4.7

*Students' Reason for Choosing Social Studies as their Favorite Subject – Treatment Group*

Response	Before Thematic Unit	After Thematic Unit
	# of students	# of students
My teacher makes it fun to learn	6	5
I find it interesting	3	4
It aligns with my career choice	0	1
Other	2	0

On question 4, students were asked the reason for choosing their least favorite subject. Students could choose multiple responses for this question from the list that was given. Before the thematic unit, nine students (35%) chose the response that the lessons are boring, compared to seven students (30%) after. Five students (19%) indicated that they could not relate to the subject of their choice before the thematic unit. This number remained the same after the unit. Two students (8%) stated that there were too many tests and quizzes before the unit and one student (4%) made this choice after the unit. The number of students who responded that they are not given multiple opportunities to

express their learning remained at two (8%) before and after the thematic unit was presented. Interestingly, 11 students (42%) indicated “Other” as their choice of reason for their least favorite, before and after the unit.

As shown in Table 4.6 above, four students responded that social studies was their least favorite subject both before and after the thematic unit. Students could choose multiple responses to this question. As illustrated in Table 4.8 below, before the thematic unit, two students answered that social studies the lessons are boring, two students stated that they cannot relate to the subject and two students chose “Other.” One of the students who chose “Other” indicated that social studies is confusing. After the thematic unit was administered, two of the students who originally chose social studies as their least favorite, switched to another subject, while two student who did not choose social studies as their least favorite now did.

On question 5 students were asked what advice they would give to the teacher of their least favorite subject. Students could check multiple responses to the question. Of the students who chose social studies as their least favorite subject before the thematic unit, there were two responses that stated that the teacher should vary the teaching strategy and three responses that the teacher needs to make the lesson more relatable to their daily lives. After the thematic unit, two students chose that the teacher needs to use more technology in teaching the lesson, two students indicated that the teacher needs to make the lesson more relatable to their daily lives, and one student chose “No advice.”

The student subject preference survey was designed to gauge students’ perception of social studies that would give an indication of their level of willingness and motivation to do well and achieve academic success in the subject.

Table 4.8

*Students' Reasons for Choosing Social Studies as their Least Favorite Subject*

Reason	Before Thematic Unit	After Thematic Unit
	# of students	# of students
The lessons are boring.	2	1
Too many tests and quizzes.	2	1
I cannot relate to this subject.	0	1
It does not align with my career choice.	0	0
I am not given multiple opportunities to express my learning.	0	0
Other	2	2

The low percentages of students who chose social studies as their favorite (21% in the control group and 38% before and after the unit in the treatment group) suggest that the intervention of the thematic unit did not change students' overall perception of social studies in a positive direction.

The data from the subject preference survey for both groups to an extent validate the identified problem of practice. The data gathered from the Likert scale survey of students' attitude towards social studies may yield additional insights into students' mindset towards academic achievement in social studies and could help to determine the effectiveness of the thematic unit, thus addressing the research questions in a definitive way.

## **Results of Likert Scale of Students' Attitude Towards Social Studies – Control Group (Before Intervention)**

Students in the control group ( $N=14$ ) completed a Likert scale survey of their attitude towards social studies. They were required to respond to ten statements, choosing either “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly Disagree.” The Likert scale of students' attitude towards social studies was designed to provide data on the way students perceive social studies. This could give an indication of their level of motivation to do the subject and their academic achievement in the subject. The results from this survey are displayed in Table 4.9 below. For analysis, the responses of “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” were discussed as agree, while “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree” were treated as disagree.

- For item 1, “I like social studies”, six students (43%) agreed, three (21%) disagreed, while five (36%) chose “Neutral.”
- For item 2, “Social studies is fun to learn” five students (36%) agreed, three (21%) disagreed, while six (43%) chose “Neutral.”
- For item 3, “I like to learn about things that happened in the past”, seven students (50%) agreed, one (7%) disagreed, while six (43%) were neutral.
- On item 4, “I like the way my teacher teaches social studies”, ten students (71%) agreed, one (7%) disagreed, and three (21%) were neutral.
- When asked to respond to item 5, “I do well on social studies quizzes and tests”, three students (21%) agreed, five (36%) disagreed, and six (43%) chose “Neutral.”

- For item 6, “I always do my social studies homework”, seven students (50%) agreed, two (14%) disagreed, while five (36%) chose “Neutral.”
- For item 7, “I would rather not take social studies class”, only two students (14%) agreed while 10 (71%) disagreed, and two (14%) chose “Neutral.”
- On item 8, “I don’t like to do social studies homework”, three students (21%) agreed, eight (58%) disagreed and three (21%) chose “Neutral.”
- None of the students agreed to item 9, “I don’t like my social studies teacher.” Twelve students (86%) disagreed, while two (14%) chose “Neutral.”
- On item 10, “Social studies will not help me in the future”, two students (14%) agreed while 12 (86%) disagreed and no student chose “Neutral.”

Statements in the Likert scale of students’ attitude towards social studies were designed to demonstrate a balance between positive statements and negative statements about social studies. This design helped to create some amount of coherence and expectedness among responses, ensuring that responses could be predicted or expected based on previous responses. This predictive element would give insight into students’ understanding of the Likert scale and the genuineness of their responses, while adding validity to the instrument.

Students in the control group demonstrated good understanding of the Likert scale which suggests that their responses were well thought out. For example, on statement one “I like social studies” 43% agreed and statement seven, “I would rather not take social studies class”, 71 % disagreed. This suggests that even though almost three -quarters of the class do not mind taking the subject, less than half the students like social studies. It may suggest that students do not necessarily like the subject but will tolerate doing it.

Table 4.9

*Likert Scale of Students' Attitude towards Social Studies – Control Group*

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
1. I like social studies.	43	36	21
2. Social studies is fun to learn.	36	43	21
3. I like learning about things that happened in the past.	50	43	7
4. I like the way my teacher teaches social studies.	71	21	7
5. I do well on social studies quizzes and tests.	21	43	36
6. I always do my social studies homework.	50	36	14
7. I would rather not take social studies class.	14	14	71
8. I don't like to do social studies homework.	21	21	58
9. I don't like my social studies teacher	0	14	86
10. Social studies will not help me in the future	14	0	86

One hundred percent of the students in the control group like the teacher (statement 9), seventy one percent of students like the way the teacher teaches social studies (statement 4), but only 36% believes that the subject is fun to learn (statement 2), only 21% do well on tests and quizzes (statement 5), and only 50% always do their homework (statement 6). Interestingly too are the large percentages of students who

chose neutral on the statements. Overall, the findings of the Likert scale of students' attitude towards social studies suggests a level of indifference to social studies among students in the control group. This was also identified in the survey of subject preferences. Taken together, these findings could explain the problem of practice and the low levels of motivation to do social studies and poor academic achievement in the subject.

### **Results of Likert Scale of Students' Attitude toward Social Studies – Treatment Group (Before and After Intervention)**

As was the case with the control group, a Likert scale of students' attitude towards social studies was administered to the treatment group before and after the thematic unit was administered. Like the subject preference survey, the Likert survey was intended to give an idea of students' perception of social studies, and their motivation to do well in the subject. The results of the Likert attitude scale are shown in Table 4.10 below. For analysis, "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" will be categorized as agree, while "Strongly Disagree" and "Disagree" will be categorized as disagree.

- To statement 1, "I like social studies", there was a slight decline from 54% agreeing before the unit to 50% after the unit. The percentage who disagreed with statement one went down from 15% before to 12% after the thematic unit. The percentage of the students that were neutral move up from 31% before the thematic unit to 38% after.
- In responding to statement 2, "Social studies is fun to learn", there was a slight increase in the number agreeing from 54% before the unit to 58% after. The

- percentage of the students who disagreed moved slightly downwards from 11% to 8%, while those who chose neutral also decreased from 35% to 34%.
- On statement 3, “I like learning about things that happened in the past”, 70% of the students agreed before the thematic unit on World War One was presented while 58% agreed after. Those disagreeing decreased from 15% before to 4% after. The number that was neutral increased significantly from 15% before to 38% after.
  - In response to statement 4, “I like the way my teacher teaches social studies”, 85% agreed before and 80% agreed after the unit. Those disagreeing increased from 4% to 8% and those who chose to be neutral increased very marginally from 11% before the unit to 12% after.
  - For statement 5, “I do well on social studies tests and quizzes”, 54% of the students responded in agreement before the thematic unit of study on World War One. This number declined to 39% after the unit. The number that disagreed more than tripled from 4% to 15% and the number who chose neutral also went up from 42% to 46%.
  - On statement 6 “I always do my social studies homework”, those who agreed declined significantly from 77% before the unit to 50% after. The respondents who disagreed increased from 0% before the unit to 12% after. The neutral responses also increased from 23% before to 38% after.
  - Response to statement 7, “I would rather not take social studies class”, saw 11% of the class agreeing before the unit, to 8% after. Those who disagreed increased slightly from 66% to 69%, while those who chose neutral remained at 23%.



- On statement 8 “I don’t like to do social studies homework”, 19% of the students reported agreement before the thematic unit. This number increased to 23% after. The number that disagreed decreased from 42% to 38%, while those who were neutral remained at 39%.
- On statement 9, “I don’t like my social studies teacher”, 0% agreed before the unit and 4% agreed after. The number that disagreed decreased from 85% to 77% while the neutral responses increased from 15% before to 19% after.
- For statement 10, “Social studies will not help me in the future”, 0% agreed before the unit while 15% agreed after. Those who disagreed decreased from 54% to 39%, while those who chose neutral remained at 46%.

The percentage of students in the treatment group who agreed with statement one before the unit decreased marginally after (54% to 50%). This apparent loss was offset with those who stated that social studies is fun to learn increasing from 54% before to 58% after the unit. There were, however, indications on most statements that there may have been a small negative shift in students’ attitude towards social studies after the thematic unit.

On statement 4, for example, the percentage that indicated that they like the way the teacher teaches decreased from 85% to 80% after the unit. The number indicating that they do well on social studies tests and quizzes (statement 5) also decreased from 54% before the unit to 39% after. The number who agreed that they always do social studies homework also decreased from 77% to 50 % after the thematic unit. Dislike for the teacher (statement 9) moved from 0% before the unit to 4% after and the percentage

agreeing that social studies will not help them in the future (statement 10) also moved from 0% before the thematic unit to 15% after.

Table 4.10

*Comparison of Likert Scale of Students' Attitude Towards Social Studies – Treatment Group*

Responses	Before Thematic Unit			After Thematic Unit		
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
1. I like social studies.	54	31	15	50	38	12
2. Social studies is fun to learn.	54	35	11	58	34	8
3. I like learning about things that happened in the past.	70	15	15	58	38	4
4. I like the way my teacher teaches social studies.	85	11	4	80	12	8
5. I do well on social studies quizzes and tests.	54	42	4	39	46	15
6. I always do my social studies homework.	77	23	0	50	38	12
7. I would rather not take social studies class.	11	23	66	8	23	69
8. I don't like to do social studies homework.	19	39	42	23	39	38

Responses	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
9. I don't like my social studies teacher.	0	15	85	4	19	77
10. Social studies will not help me in the future.	0	46	54	15	46	39

On statement 7, however, the percentage that chose that they would rather not take social studies decreased marginally from 11% to 8%. As the data was analyzed, the high percentages of neutral responses were a cause for concern both before and after the thematic unit was completed.

Based on the data presented in Table 4.10 above, there were no outstanding differences among the responses of students in the treatment group to indicate that the thematic unit had a significant impact on their perception of social studies in a positive way. This pattern was also seen in the control group. This suggests a level of indifference to social studies that may have an impact on students' performance and academic achievement in the subject.

The findings of the Likert scale of students' attitude towards social studies and the subject preference surveys both seem to validate the identified problem of practice for this research. The results also provided an answer to research question two (What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War 1, an integrated approach, have on students' perception of social studies?), indicating that the thematic unit did not impact students' perception of social studies in a positive way.

The analysis of students' pre-test and post-test data may provide further valuable insight into the effectiveness of the thematic unit and how well research questions one and three were addressed.

### **Results of Pre-Test and Post-Test - Control Group**

Students in both the control group ( $N=14$ ) and the treatment group ( $N=26$ ) were administered an identical pre-test and post-test, comprising 33 questions, on World War One. The pre-test data served as a baseline to gauge students' background knowledge of the topic. An item analysis of the results for the control group is displayed in Table 4.11. The data shows the percentage of students who answered each item correctly on both the pre-test and the post-test. Since the questions on the test are standards-based, a score of 80% on each item will indicate whether the students mastered the standards (7-4.1 and 7-4.2). Questions 1- 20 dealt with standard 7-4.1 (Causes of WW1 and America's Impact) while questions 21 – 33 covered standard 7-4.2 (Outcomes of WW1 and the terms and effects of the Treaty of Versailles). All questions were aligned to the standards and were based on the format of SC PASS.

As shown in the Table 4.11, on three questions (3, 14, and 29) the post-test scores remained the same. Questions three and fourteen addressed standard 7-4.1, the causes of World War One and America's impact on the war. Question 29 addressed standard 7-4.2 about the impact of the Treaty of Versailles. On two questions (9 and 22) the percentage of students answering correctly decreased from 50% to 43% and from 29% to 14% respectively. On question 20, the percentage of students who answered correctly moved from 29% to 100%. Question 20 required students to recall that African American fighters were given a nickname for their bravery in the war. As African Americans, most

students could identify with the answer (Harlem Hellfighters). There were 28 questions for which the post-test scores increased. Overall, there were seven questions (1, 12, 16, 20, 23, 30, and 33) on which the students scored the desired 80% to indicate mastery of the standards. There were four visual questions (those accompanied by a map, diagram, chart, or picture) on the test. (12, 20, 23, and 27). Students in the control group increased their performance on all four visual questions even though both pre-test and post-test scores were low for question 27 (pre-test 21% and post-test 36%). The data analysis indicate that students' learning was almost evenly spread across the two standard indicators (7-4.1 and 7-4.2) that were covered.


Even though the control group was not given any intervention, to test for growth from pre-test to post-test, a paired t-test was done to compare testing means. There was significant growth in the scores from pre-test ( $M = 30.06$ ,  $SD = 13.75$ ) to post-test ( $M = 58.21$ ,  $SD = 23.18$ );  $t(32) = -6.57$ ,  $p = 0.0000001$ . The comparative analysis suggests significant statistical growth in students' performance from be the traditional methods of teaching social studies.

Table 4.11

*Item Analysis of Pre-test and Post-test for Control Group*

Item #	Question	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Difference
1	As empires grew, European nations increased their ability to protect land possessions and their citizens through a buildup of arms. This buildup of arms is referred to as:	36	86	50

Item #	Question	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Difference
2	The competition to set up colonies in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, also known as _____, lead to tensions in Europe and ultimately WWI.	36	64	28
3	All throughout Europe, a strong feeling of _____, developed as countries united and loyalty to one's homeland and culture became increasing important to people.	57	57	0
4	In order to keep a balance of power, and keep the peace among nations, European nations formed _____, with a pledge to send support if needed in times of trouble or war.	43	64	21
5	This tragic event caused by Gavrillo Princip and the Black Hand ignited the powder keg that lead to the Great War:	14	57	43
6.	WWI was fought between which two alliances?	64	79	15
7	Where did the fighting on the Western front take place?	36	57	21
8	Which of the following was not part of the Triple Entente or later the Allied Powers?	36	71	35
9	Which of the following was not part of the Triple Alliance or later the Central Powers?	50	43	-7
10	Which of the following weapons, along with trench foot and diseases, increased the number of casualties during World War I?	14	21	7
11	World War I left millions dead, and even millions more wounded. Which of the following best describes the reason for so many casualties never seen in prior wars?	43	57	14

Item #	Question	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Difference
12	 <p>With modern weapons increasing casualties to number never previously seen before in warfare this new battlefield warfare saw soldiers dug into fortified mud and dirt bunkers to avoid artillery and machine gun across from their enemies often charging into an empty or destroyed landscape known a No Man's land to often disaster filled results even in victory.</p>	36	93	57
13	Which of the following effects of World War I helped contribute to the Russian Revolution?	21	36	15
14	In 1917, Russia pulled out of World War I. What event(s) caused Russia to take this action?	21	21	0
15	Which statement best describes the relationship between World War I and the Russian Revolution?	14	64	50
16	In 1918 Russia pulled out of WWI ceded territory to the Central Powers by signing this treaty?	7	93	86
17	Why did President Woodrow Wilson and the United States enter into the war late?	21	29	8
18	Congress voted to declare war on Germany for several reasons. Which of these contributed to Congress' decision to declare war on Germany?	57	71	14

19 What was the impact of the entry of the United States into WWI? 36 43 7

20  29 100 71

This mostly African American group of US soldiers fought in WWI earned this nickname from their German opponents as a sign of respect for their bravery and fierce fighting in battle.

21 One goal for a lasting peace that President Woodrow Wilson included in his Fourteen Points was? 14 64 50

22 President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points were based on the belief that 29 14 -15

???????
<b>Take the blame for the war</b>
<b>Pay reparations to the Allies for damages</b>
<b>Restrictions on the size of the army and navy</b>
<b>Give up Alsace-Lorraine and all overseas territories</b>

23 What political document placed these restrictions on Germany after WWI? 29 86 57

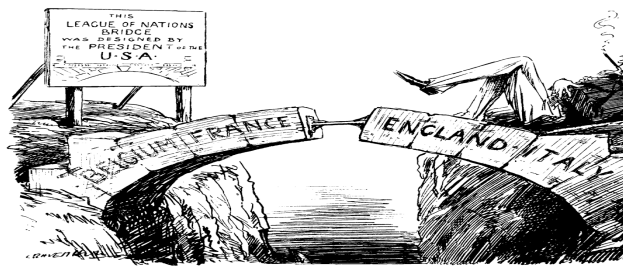
24 How was the Treaty of Versailles affected by the Fourteen Points? 21 36 15

25 What was the war guilt clause? 21 64 43



26 Why did United States Senators vote against the United States joining the League of Nations? 21 36 15

27 21 36 15



THE GAP IN THE BRIDGE.

What is the best interpretation of this political cartoon?

28 What was one of the terms imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles? 21 64 43

29 How did the Treaty of Versailles change political boundaries, or geographical boundaries, in Europe? 29 29 0

30 This nearly eight-hundred-year-old empire and Central Powers members was dissolved and divided up onto several new Eastern European countries and allowed for the creation of the Middle East? 29 86 57

31 The new nation of Yugoslavia created after WWI included several nationalistic and ethnic groups including this group \_\_\_\_\_ which involved in the events that ignited the powder keg known as WWI. 29 50 21

32 The newly created “mandate” countries created in the Middle East such as Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon fell under the control of which European powers? 36 64 28

33 This British declaration promised the Jewish people a new nation of their own in Palestine. 21 86 65

Based on the data presented in Table 4.11 above, students' performance on the post-test was mixed. On the one hand, they were expected to improve on their performance over the pre-test, which they basically did (only questions 9 and 22 had a negative difference). On the other hand, their performance fell below expectations as it relates to the amount of increase that was expected. While good gains were identified on some questions (such as questions 20 and 33) there was only one question (number 16) with an increase of 86% that would indicate mastery of the standard. Students did learn using the traditional approach to teaching social studies but the low performance on the post-test could be interpreted as corroborating the problem of practice and hence the need for the research question as to whether a new approach, a thematic unit on World War One might increase students' performance in social studies in a middle school seventh-grade social studies class. Notwithstanding, there was significant statistical growth in the control group from pre-test ( $M= 30.06$ ,  $SD = 13.75$ ) to post-test ( $M = 58.21$ ,  $SD = 23.18$ );  $t(32) = -6.57$ ,  $p = 0.0000001$ .

### **Results of Pre-test and Post-test – Treatment Group**

To answer the research question on the impact that a thematic unit may have on students' performance on a social studies unit test, an identical multiple-choice pre-test and post-test, comprising of 33 questions, was administered to the treatment group ( $N = 26$ ) prior to and after the administering of the thematic unit on World War One. Seeing that all items were based on the SC PASS standards for social studies (7-4.1 and 7-4.2), mastery was set at 80%. An item analysis of the pre and post-tests is shown in Table 4.12 below. The data is a comparison of students' performance on each item in the test in terms of the percentage of students who answered each question correctly.

Of the 33 questions on the test there were 24 that saw an increase in the percentage of students who answered correctly in the post-test compared to 28 questions in which students in the control group showed increase. There were, however, nine questions (7, 15, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 31, 32) in which there was a decrease in the percentage of students answering correctly on the post-test, compared to two questions in which there was a decrease in performance in the control group. There were four visual questions on the test (questions 12, 20, 23, and 27). While students in the control group increased their scores on all four, students in the treatment group decreased on one (number 20). The control group's scores on question 20 increased from 29% to 100%, while scores for the treatment group on the same question decreased from 58% to 42%. There were seven questions on the post-test on which students scored 80% or higher, an indication of mastery of the standard. Students performed significantly better on standard 7-4.1. Of the 20 questions that were based on the causes and impact of the United States on World War One (7-4.1) students' performance improved on 17 of the questions. Of the 17 questions students score 80% or higher on five questions, indicating their mastery. Conversely, students' performance decreased on six of the 13 questions that addressed standard 7-4.2 (The effects of the Treaty of Versailles). This performance fell below expectations but are not surprising as from observations of students' attitude as the thematic unit progressed, a growing number of students seemed not as enthused as at the beginning.


To calculate for significant growth in students' achievement on the unit test on World War One a paired t-test was conducted to compare testing means from the pre-test to the post-test. This was done to determine the effectiveness of the intervention (the


thematic unit on World War One) and to answer the research question. There was statistically significant growth in the scores from pre-test ( $M = 42.21$ ,  $SD = 15.19$ ) to post-test ( $M = 59.24$ ,  $SD = 22.74$ ),  $t(32) = -4.51$ ,  $p = 0.00004$ .

Table 4.12

*Item analysis of Pre-test and Post-test for Treatment Group*

Item #	Question	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Difference
1	As empires grew, European nations increased their ability to protect land possessions and their citizens through a buildup of arms. This buildup of arms is referred to as:	69	85	16
2	The competition to set up colonies in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, also known as _____, lead to tensions in Europe and ultimately WWI.	23	54	31
3	All throughout Europe, a strong feeling of _____, developed as countries united and loyalty to one's homeland and culture became increasing important to people.	42	73	31
4	In order to keep a balance of power, and keep the peace among nations, European nations formed _____, with a pledge to send support if needed in times of trouble or war.	38	62	24
5	This tragic event caused by Gavrillo Princip and the Black Hand ignited the powder keg that lead to the Great War:	23	73	50
6.	WWI was fought between which two alliances?	54	96	42
7	Where did the fighting on the Western front take place?	69	46	-23
8	Which of the following was not part of the Triple Entente or later the Allied Powers?	35	54	19

9	Which of the following was not part of the Triple Alliance or later the Central Powers?	31	58	27
10	Which of the following weapons, along with trench foot and diseases, increased the number of casualties during World War I?	31	50	19
11	World War I left millions dead, and even millions more wounded. Which of the following best describes the reason for so many casualties never seen in prior wars?	46	85	39
				
12	With modern weapons increasing casualties to number never previously seen before in warfare this new battlefield warfare saw soldiers dug into fortified mud and dirt bunkers to avoid artillery and machine gun across from their enemies often charging into an empty or destroyed landscape known a No Man's land to often disaster filled results even in victory.	62	100	39
13	Which of the following effects of World War I helped contribute to the Russian Revolution?	35	65	30
14	In 1917, Russia pulled out of World War I. What event(s) caused Russia to take this action?	19	35	16
15	Which statement best describes the relationship between World War I and the Russian Revolution?	27	23	-4
16	In 1918 Russia pulled out of WWI ceded territory to the Central Powers by signing this treaty?	12	15	3
17	Why did President Woodrow Wilson and the United States enter into the war late?	50	73	23

18	Congress voted to declare war on Germany for several reasons. Which of these contributed to Congress' decision to declare war on Germany?	58	85	27					
19	What was the impact of the entry of the United States into WWI?	35	42	7					
20	 <p>This mostly African American group of US soldiers fought in WWI earned this nickname from their German opponents as a sign of respect for their bravery and fierce fighting in battle.</p>	58	42	-16					
21	One goal for a lasting peace that President Woodrow Wilson included in his Fourteen Points was	38	73	35					
22	President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points were based on the belief that	42	19	-23					
23	<table border="1" data-bbox="358 1201 976 1501"> <tr> <td>???????</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Take the blame for the war</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Pay reparations to the Allies for damages</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Restrictions on the size of the army and navy</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Give up Alsace-Lorraine and all overseas territories</b></td> </tr> </table> <p>What political document placed these restrictions on Germany after WWI?</p>	???????	<b>Take the blame for the war</b>	<b>Pay reparations to the Allies for damages</b>	<b>Restrictions on the size of the army and navy</b>	<b>Give up Alsace-Lorraine and all overseas territories</b>	69	81	12
???????									
<b>Take the blame for the war</b>									
<b>Pay reparations to the Allies for damages</b>									
<b>Restrictions on the size of the army and navy</b>									
<b>Give up Alsace-Lorraine and all overseas territories</b>									
24	How was the Treaty of Versailles affected by the Fourteen Points?	42	35	-7					
25	What was the war guilt clause?	38	77	39					

26 Why did United States Senators vote against the United States joining the League of Nations? 58 54 -4

27  35 77 42

What is the best interpretation of this political cartoon?

28 What was one of the terms imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles? 69 58 -11

29 How did the Treaty of Versailles change political boundaries, or geographical boundaries, in Europe? 31 73 42

30 This nearly eight-hundred-year-old empire and Central Powers members was dissolved and divided up onto several new Eastern European countries and allowed for the creation of the Middle East? 35 85 50

31 The new nation of Yugoslavia created after WWI included several nationalistic and ethnic groups including this group \_\_\_\_\_ which involved in the events that ignited the powder keg known as WWI. 42 27 -15

32 The newly created “mandate” countries created in the Middle East such as Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon fell under the control of which European powers? 42 38 -4

33 This British declaration promised the Jewish people a new nation of their own in Palestine. 35 42 7

There was significant growth in students’ learning from pre-test to post-test.

However, students achieved mastery (which was set at 80% or higher) on only seven of the 33 questions (1, 6, 11, 12, 18, 23, 30). This was disappointing especially considering the high level of participation that most students showed during the unit. On the other

hand, as the researcher observed students' attitude and performance during the unit there was a noticeable drop-off in students' enthusiasm that could lead to a failure to adequately review for the test. The relatively short time (10 days) within which the unit had to be covered could have proven to be insufficient in light of the amount of subject matter that had to be covered. The wording of questions and the level of critical, analytical, and practical thinking required to answer the questions may have also contributed to students' low performance on questions relating to standard 7-4.2. For example, both control and treatment groups struggled on questions 22, 24, and 26, having to do with the Treaty of Versailles.

### **Comparison of Post-test Scores for Control and Treatment Groups**

An unpaired t-test was used to compare the means of both control and treatment groups to determine statistical significance. There was no statistically significant difference in the post-test means of the control group ( $M = 58.21$ ,  $SD = 23.18$ ) and the treatment group ( $M = 59.24$ ,  $SD = 22.74$ ),  $t(64) = -0.18$ ,  $p = 0.86$ . The results from the comparison suggests that a thematic unit on World War One had no statistically significant effect on students' academic performance on a social studies unit test in a middle school social studies class when compared to the traditional methods of teaching social studies.

The researcher found the results from the independent t-test to be surprising given the body of literature (Moyer, 2016; Caine & Caine, 1994; Jenson, 2000; Davies & Shankar-Brown, 2011; Bhat, Hosapatna, Kotian, Souza, & Sousa, 2016; McBee, 2000) supporting the advantage of thematic units over traditional approaches to teaching. The researcher believes that while students in the treatment group benefited more from the



rich learning experiences provided in the thematic unit, students in the control group seemed to have been drilled in preparing for the test, as is the practice in traditional approaches where preparation for high-stakes testing is more a focus of teaching. According to Li and Xiong (2018) regular education teachers often embed several test-taking strategies in their teaching as they prepare students for state standardized test. These strategies include mirroring questions after those on the standardized tests to familiarize students with the standardized testing format, along with drilling students with those questions. This could be a possible explanation for the performance of students in the control group on the post-test. Thematic units, on the other hand, do not focus on test-taking strategies but rather on providing rich integrated real-world experiences that facilitates making connections between skills, content, and life itself (McBee, 2000). Thus, students in the treatment group benefited from the thematic unit but because there was not a focus on questioning geared at test-taking, coupled with inadequate time for a more meaningful review for the test, the results did not reflect a significant difference between thematic teaching and traditional methods.

The fact that the unit on World War One was taught to the two groups by two different teachers could have also had an impact on the results. While the researcher was more interested in ensuring that students in the treatment group were exposed to the rich, real-world experiences of the thematic unit, the regular classroom teacher seemed to have been more interested in covering the content through traditional means and in as short a time as possible to move on to the next unit in the curriculum. The researcher recalls that on day seven (of 10) of the thematic unit, the other teacher reported that he was finished with the unit and was ready to have the students complete the post-test. The researcher

was thus felt pressured to wrap the thematic unit up in order to keep pace so that when the thematic unit ended, and the regular teacher re-assumed the teaching, the students in the treatment group would not have been behind. This scenario contributed to the reduction in time for review of the content (for the treatment group) while simultaneously allowed for more time (3 days) for extra review for the control group.

### **Results of Semi-structured Interviews**

Qualitative data on students' perception of the thematic unit as it relates to their overall perception of social studies, were gleaned from students through the administration of semi-structured interviews. A total of 17 students were interviewed. Eight of the students interviewed were from the group who failed to obtain a passing score of 60% or higher on the post-test, while nine interviewees scored 60% or higher. The interview schedule consisted of five open-ended questions, with follow-up questions as needed for students to elaborate on their answers thus giving a richer quality of data. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) state that "Interviewing students in the classroom can be a rich source of data" (p. 103). According to Mertler (2017) "When gathering truly qualitative data, interviews are probably best conducted following semi-structured or open-ended formats. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher asks several "base" questions but also has the option of following up a given response with alternative, optional questions" (p. 134). Students' responses were transcribed and analyzed. A structural coding technique (Saldana, 2009) was used to help determine the categories into which students' response would fall.

Each interview lasted between 10 and 15 minutes and was hampered by students' showing visible signs of unease despite my efforts to reassure them that were not in

trouble and that they should express themselves freely as there were no right or wrong answers. Students gave very short answers to the questions and in most cases did not elaborate even when follow-up questions were asked. Due to the brevity of students' responses there were no clearly identifiable themes. Students' responses were therefore coded based on the key words and common phrases that they used and the two groups (the eight students who failed the post-test and the nine students who passed the post-test) responses were compared based on the following descriptions:

- Personal reflection on the thematic unit
- The impact of the thematic unit on students' learning
- Comparison of the thematic unit to traditional strategies
- Impact of thematic unit on students' perception of social studies

**Personal reflection on thematic unit.** In both groups (those who failed the post-test and those who passed the post-test) there were more positive responses towards the use of the thematic unit than were negative comments. Five of the students who failed the post-test and all nine students who passed the post-test (total 14 out of 17) expressed a positive attitude towards the thematic unit. One very common expression among students who failed the post-test was that the thematic unit was fun. Responses such "It was fun because I like doing active classwork", "It was ok", "It was good, I had a lot of fun" and "Yea, I kinda like it" were expressed by students even though they did not pass the post-test. On the other hand, two of the students who failed the post-test, stated that "It was unnecessary" and "I think it is not sufficient enough to teach this generation. It was all over the place and very confusing." Another student responded that "I don't pay attention in class so I don't feel nothing."

Positive sentiments were also expressed by students who passed the post-test. There were comments such as “It was ok”. “I enjoyed it a lot”, “It was cool”, “It was fine, I liked it”, ‘I thought it was very interesting” and “I learned a lot and had fun.” Generally, most students in both groups (those who failed the post-test and those who passed the post-test) seemed to have had fun learning with the thematic unit approach. This was evidenced by 14 of the 17 students (82%) expressing a positive view of the thematic unit.

**The impact of the thematic unit on students’ learning.** Interestingly, six of the eight students who were interviewed after failing the post-test stated that they learned better from the thematic unit. They stated that “The thematic unit was easy, it was explained better”, “The numerous activities made the learning more interesting”, “The videos and songs gave more details on the topic”, and that “There was not a lot of note taking” as with the traditional approach. One student indicated an appreciation for the thematic unit because “The thematic unit deal all subjects.”

While the students who failed the post-test were more in favor of the thematic unit, the students who passed the post-test were more evenly divided between the thematic unit and the traditional teaching. Five students in the group that passed the post-test responded that the thematic unit had a big impact on their learning while four students felt that the thematic unit did not have a huge impact on their learning. Some stated that they were comfortable with either strategy and would learn either way. Students in the group who passed the post-test commented that, “Yes, I learned better because I was more involved with the songs and the lesson in general”, “Yes I did learn better from this strategy because it helped me know how to explain more details about

WW1”, and “Yes it made me think more about the material. It was easier than worksheets, I learn better from listening.”

**Comparison of thematic unit to traditional approach.** Four of the eight students who failed the post-test expressed that they prefer to be taught using the thematic approach, while three of the nine who passed stated that they prefer the thematic approach. Students who preferred the thematic approach stated that “It really caught my attention”, “It worked better for me”, “It’s easier to learn”, “The thematic unit goes faster, and I learned more”, and “I prefer using the thematic unit because it really helps with the explanation, social communication to the teacher and others to help me.” One student mentioned that with the traditional approach “We would just take notes and watch a video here and there but with this we did a lot of activities which made the class fun.” Another student claimed that “in class a lot of worksheets and notes, read from textbook. Thematic unit was easier.” There was one student who responded that the thematic unit can be fun but “Don’t use the math and ELA just use the arts, science, and music material.”

Gabe (pseudonym), stated:

The thematic unit explain more about the topic and key events about the topic, it also used more communication with each other. The strategy that my social studies teacher used was like taking notes on the topic, having worksheets that come with the notes, and review the notes independently without communication with others and the teacher.

Two students in the group that failed the post-test and two in the passing group felt that the traditional approach was better. Their comments included, “I learned better from previous strategies because it involves students more and more of a learning conversation”, “I prefer the previous method because I understand the material better”,

and “I like Mr. Scott’s strategy. He makes it more interesting and more of us wanting to participate.”

There were also two students from the group that failed the post-test and two from those who passed the post-test who indicated that they did not prefer either strategy. Their responses were that it does not matter what strategy is used they will learn any way. One of the responses that stood out was, “I learn however they teach while they I explain it so I can understand.”

This comparison showed that 50% of the students who failed the post-test preferred the thematic approach while 33% of those who passed preferred the thematic approach. It was interesting to note that most of the students who passed the post-test and who were interviewed preferred the traditional strategies. This finding could mean that these students are highly motivated to work with whatever approach their teacher chooses to use. It could also be that the thematic approach is new to them and they would need more time to get used to it. According to Brackett (2007) the reason “why teaching approaches prove effective with some students and not others may relate to motivation, but I firmly believe all classroom successes and failures cannot be explained through motivational theory or even the presence or absence of inspirational sources” (p. 30). Brackett (2007) adds that “Not the right time, not the right place, not the right combination of personalities . . . any of these conditions might account for a lack of student participation, and none will respond to the most optimistic of deliveries” (p. 31).

**Impact of thematic unit on perception of social studies.** Of the eight students who were interviewed from the group who failed the post-test, there was one who expressed outright that the thematic unit changed her perception in a negative way.

Having expressed earlier that the thematic unit was unnecessary for her generation, she also stated that, “The thematic unit made me hate social studies. I prefer the other strategies. It caused my grade to drop.” Another student stated, “I still like social studies with or without the thematic unit.” There was also another student in the group who failed the post-test who stated, “I love social studies, but I don’t pay attention in class to make good grades.”

Among the nine students who were interviewed and who passed the post-test, only one expressed that the thematic unit changed her perception in a slightly negative direction. She stated that, “Yes it made it less interesting somehow. It made it more of an average class.” Four students in the group expressed that the thematic unit changed their perception of social studies in a positive way. Their comments included, “Yes, I could use other subjects while learning”, “Yes because I learn easier the way it explains all of the main detail in the topic”, and “Yes, it showed me how fun social studies can be and think it should be applied to other subjects.” Other students in the group expressed the idea that the thematic unit did not really change their perception of social studies because they love the subject and will do the work regardless of which strategy is used.

The data analysis of the semi-structured interviews reveals that 14 of the 17 students who were interviewed had a positive personal reflection on the thematic unit; 11 of the 17 students felt that the thematic unit had a positive impact on their learning; 13 of the 17 students responded that the thematic unit changed or maintained their perception of social studies in a positive direction; seven of the 17 students preferred the thematic unit to traditional strategies, six of the 17 students preferred the traditional strategies, and

four students did not choose a preference for either thematic unit or traditional strategies, stating that they are comfortable learning from either one.

The results from the semi-structured interviews indicate that more students favored the use of a thematic unit in teaching social studies than those who do not. Even among those who failed the post-test, most students expressed that the thematic unit was fun. The unit also had a positive impact on students' perception of social studies, even though this did not reflect convincingly on students' performance on the unit test on World War One. The unit was a departure from what White (1995) calls "an endless stream of dates, facts, names, and events devoid of any human element or personal relevance" (p. 1). White (1995) derided textbooks, as offering superficial coverage of content, complicating instruction and hampering understanding. White (1995) adds that "topics become something "to cover" as quickly as possible and often at the expense of student-centered learning activities, which are dismissed as too time consuming" (p. 2). The activities in the unit were student-centered and there was no textbook usage along with note taking. According to Bolak, Bialach, and Dunphy (2005) "Integrating the arts with the core curriculum is an energizing solution at the middle level. For those whose lives are richer because of a connection to the arts, the value of an arts-integrated academic program is clear." (p. 11). Students enjoyed the music that was used and quickly learned the songs.

### **Analysis of Observation**

Throughout the period of the thematic unit, students' attitude and responses were noted. Based on the school's schedule, the lessons were done at the time when students were regularly scheduled to have social studies. This was immediately after lunch and



recess. Tardiness was not an issue as the regular teacher took the students to lunch and recess thus ensuring that everyone returned to class at the same time. The average attendance for the class was 92% during the administration of the thematic unit. Traditionally, after lunch and recess, students at GBMS take a long time to settle down and some students tend to want to sleep or talk to their classmates. A concerted effort had to be made every day to get students motivated to begin working and to ensure that they stayed on task. From observations students were a bit hesitant at first to embrace the thematic unit but as the activities were rolled out and they had the opportunity to interact as the different subjects were integrated, students began to warm up to the thematic unit.

Many students were also selective in the activities that they showed interest in. The mapwork and coloring seemed to excite students, but they did not show keen interest in the activities that required them to research information, think critically, and read. Several students also struggled with their math skills and it was evident that they did not want to do the math activities. A common question that was asked for each activity was, “Is this for a grade?” Due to time constraint, chapters of the literature book “*Hero over Here: A Story of World War I*” were copied and given to students to read for discussion the next class. Approximately half of the students read the chapters from one day to the next. Most students, however, showed keen interest in the discussions of the different chapters, suggesting that many students would rather be read to, or be told about what was read, than to read for themselves. The literature book was about the influenza epidemic that took place during World War One that resulted in many deaths both in the United States and among the soldiers who were fighting in Europe. Students were able to make connection with the book as many of them have contracted the flu during the

seasonal outbreaks. They were interested to know why so many people died from the flu then but not many people die from it today. There led to a lively discussion on vaccines with some students expressing the idea that the vaccine itself causes the flu. One student did a mini-research and brought information on vaccines to share with the class.

All the students enjoyed the two songs that were used in the unit and most seemed to have preferred the hymn-like “*Over There*” over the rap “*My Best Friend*.” This was somewhat interesting seeing that most of the students were African-Americans who generally favor rap music. Students would request that we listen to the songs every day and several of them learned the words and would engage in sing-along. Seeing that students were getting the content while at the same time enjoying the activities, several students would express to me away from the presence of their regular teacher that they enjoy the thematic unit because they did not have to do a lot of note-taking.

It was observed that students’ interest began to wane towards the end of the thematic unit. It could possibly have been that there were too many activities and the time frame was limited seeing the unit was scheduled for a two-week period. The researcher also felt that he had to rush towards the end in order to get the activities done to complete the unit. As is typical of middle school students, there were a few disciplinary issues during the intervention, but the researcher ensured that these were handled effectively and that school and district disciplinary policy guidelines were followed. One female student who for the most part was uncooperative during the unit was written up for disrupting the class. She started crying and the other girls felt that the researcher was being mean so several of them started working slow. The researcher was also of the view that towards the end of the unit the students were respectfully waiting him out to get back

their regular teacher. Notwithstanding, the student-centered nature of the lessons engaged most students and they were also made aware that the unit would not be repeated by the regular education teacher. Most students welcomed the opportunity to receive grades for the performance tasks such as the sing-along, the writing of a code similar to the Zimmermann Telegram, and the mapwork.

### **Triangulation of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to conduct an action research to answer the research questions:

RQ 1: What is the impact of implementing a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, on students' motivation to learn social studies?

RQ 2: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, have on students' perception of social studies?

RQ 3: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One have on students' performance on a social studies unit test?

The research questions guided the study and served as a response to the problem of practice. The research set out to determine whether a new strategy of teaching social studies, a thematic approach, would change students' perception of social studies, increase students' motivation to do social studies, and improve their academic achievement in the subject.

There were mixed findings from the data. With less than a third of the students in the control group and less than half the students in the treatment group cited social studies as their favorite subject before and after the unit, the survey of students' subject

preference did not show social studies as being high on students' list of favorite subjects. The findings of the Likert scale of students' attitude towards social studies reveal an indifference to the subject and there was also no observable difference in students' attitude towards social studies after the thematic unit.

From observation of the general classroom and the students' interview responses, students in the treatment group expressed a liking for the thematic unit, and 13 of the 17 interviewees indicated that the thematic unit had a positive impact on their perception of social studies. Also, students who were interviewed expressed preference for the thematic unit over traditional approaches to teaching social studies.

Paired t-tests of both the control group's and treatment group's pre-test and post-test mean scores reveal that there was statistical significance between students' pre-test and post-test scores. This means that students learned the content from both the traditional methods (control group) and thematic unit (treatment group) of teaching social studies. However, the comparative results of the post-tests for both the control and treatment groups showed that the use of a thematic unit did not have the desired impact on students' achievement.

An independent t-test comparing the post-test means of the control and treatment groups reveal that there was no statistical significance between the scores which indicate that the thematic unit had no greater impact statistically on students learning over the traditional methods of teaching social studies. This was evidenced by the independent t-test results of the post-test means of the control group ( $M = 58.21$ ,  $SD = 23.18$ ) and the treatment group ( $M = 59.24$ ,  $SD = 22.74$ ),  $t(64) = -0.18$ ,  $p = 0.86$ . There was a marginal difference in mean of 1.03 percentage points ( $59.24 - 58.21$ ) in favor of the thematic unit.

With this very slim advantage the case could be made and there is extensive supporting literature in favor of teaching with thematic units.

In terms of how these findings relate to the research questions, the quantitative data suggest that the thematic unit was not as effective as the researcher hoped that it would have been, but as students elaborated on their own thoughts and perception of the unit, coupled with researcher observation, a rich qualitative data set revealed that students did in fact enjoy the thematic unit and that it had a positive effect on their perception of social studies. The challenge then is to bridge the gap between both sets of data, ensuring that the positive perception that students expressed is translated to a higher level of motivation to do social studies and improvement in academic performance on tests.

While the researcher is pleased that a subgroup of students (those who were interviewed) expressed positive feelings towards the thematic unit, there was not enough evidence (based on the results of the surveys and post-test performance) that the thematic unit adequately addressed the issue raised in research question one regarding students' motivation to do social studies. The researcher thus was led to ponder the many factors that affect students' level of intrinsic motivation not just as it relates to social studies but schooling and education in general. Most of the students were from low socio-economic background and Jenson (2009) chronicled the difficulties that students in poverty face in school. Lack of home resources to support education, little value placed on education, lack of basic necessities, missing one or both parents, hunger, gangs, drugs, despair, and hopelessness, in varying degrees affect students' level of motivation in school. There is also the disproportionate way in which disciplinary actions are taken against minority and low-income students compared to whites and more affluent peers (Bradshaw, Mitchell,

& Leaf, 2010; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2012, 2014). As a result of any or combination of these factors, students often show up for school already with a mental block and a poor disposition towards teachers and learning.

### **Summary**

This action research focused on the use of a thematic unit as an alternative strategy to the traditional methods of teaching social studies. The mixed-method convergent design provided both quantitative and qualitative data that were gathered in response to the research questions surrounding the impact of the thematic unit on students' perception of, motivation to learn, and academic achievement on a social studies unit test. While the results point to students' appreciation for the use of a thematic unit as an alternative strategy to traditional approaches to teaching social studies, the study results also found that the thematic unit did not in any significant way increase students' achievement on a social studies unit test when compared to the traditional strategies. More research is needed to categorically validate the findings of this action research. In chapter five of this study I outlined the next steps to develop an action plan that will guide my practice as an educator.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter of the action research begins with an overview of the preceding chapters and will be followed by an action plan outlining the steps that will be taken as a result of the findings of the research. This will be followed by a discussion of the implications of the research for future practice and further research, and the chapter will end with a summary.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Green Branch Middle School is a Title One school located in rural South Carolina. The school is situated in a high-poverty, low-income area, and serves predominantly African-American students. The problem of generational poverty presents a challenge to these students and many of them lack effective support at home to motivate them to do well academically. Most of the students rarely do homework assignments, some struggle with reading and comprehension and this often leads to class disruptions. Academic achievement is low in all core content areas as is reflected in the low scores in teacher-made tests, district benchmark assessments, and state standardized tests. On-going observations reveal that students at GBMS love sporting activities and seem to have an affinity for the fine arts and computer-related courses over the core content areas.

GBMS is a one-to-one school with each student being issued a district MacBook

to assist them in incorporating technology in their learning. Many students often violate the technology policy by accessing Facetime, social media, and playing games during instruction. Faced with low academic performance in social studies as the problem of practice, this action research focused on the impact that a new student-centered, activity-oriented strategy would have on students' performance in the subject. This new strategy utilized a thematic approach as opposed to the traditional methods of teaching social studies, such as lecture, textbook, worksheets, and videos. This thematic approach was utilized in fulfilling the state standards (7-4.1 & 7-4.2) which requires students to study the causes and effects of World War One, including America's impact on the war and the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles.

### **Research questions**

To meet the state's requirement and to address the problem of practice, three research questions were formulated as follows:

RQ 1: What is the impact of implementing a thematic unit on World War One on students' motivation to learn social studies?

RQ 2: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One, an integrated approach, have on students' perception of social studies?

RQ 3: What impact will the implementation of a thematic unit on World War One have on students' performance on unit test in social studies?

The research questions set out to determine the impact, if any, that a thematic unit on World War One would have on students' perception of social studies, their motivation to do the subject, and their subsequent academic achievement on a unit test and ultimately on the state standardized test, the SC PASS.



## Literature Review

Mertler (2017) states that “a review of literature allows you to use the insights and discoveries of others whose research came before yours in order to make your research more efficient and effective” (p. 61). The literature review presents an evidenced- based analysis of the present understanding of the topic and guides the reader towards a cohesive awareness and understanding of what the research question is (Gray, 2014; Machi & McEvoy, 2016). The literature search presented in chapter two included Education Source and ERIC databases utilizing foundational as well as current research on the different topics of interest. Internet sources, books, and magazines were scoured for additional information on the literature. A review of the existing literature on the nature of social studies and the factors that affect performance in social studies were carried out. The literature review highlighted the importance of social studies education in developing a well-informed citizenry and the promotion of democratic ideals. According to the NCSS (2018) active and responsible citizens are able to identify and analyze public problems, deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues, take constructive action together, reflect on their actions, create and sustain groups, and influence institutions both large and small. They vote, serve on juries when called, follow the news and current events, and participate in voluntary groups and efforts.

The literature review also brought an awareness to the myriad of variables that impact social studies learning thus creating a greater understanding of the problem of practice. These factors include the marginalization of social studies (Brewer & Brown, 2009; Burstein, Curtis, & Hutton, 2006; Adams, Bolick, & Willox, 2010), and socio-

economic background (Gassama, 2012; Leroy & Symes, 2001; Jenson, 2009). According to the NCSS (2018) there is a sad reality that fewer and fewer young people, particularly students of color and students in poverty, are receiving a high-quality social studies education, despite the central role of social studies in preparing students for the responsibilities of citizenship.

The nature of thematic units was highlighted as a viable alternative to traditional teaching strategies. Teaching thematically inspire greater intellectual curiosity, promotes deeper engagement with the past, and empowers students to find their own answers to the problems of society (Metro, 2017; Yorks & Follo,1993). Answers to the research questions focused on the application and effectiveness of thematic units and integration in the teaching of social studies with the other core curriculum subjects in addition to the non-core subjects of art, literature, and music. Finally, the literature examined the nature and historical perspective of thematic units as well as presented its alignment to the Learner- Centered curriculum ideology.

### **Study design**

The action research was carried out using a convergent mixed-methods design. This design allowed for collection of both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously allowing for perspectives from each (Terrell, 2012). Quantitative data were garnered from a survey of students' subject preference, a Likert scale of students' attitude towards social studies, and an identical pre-test and post-test on World War One. Qualitative data source included a semi-structured interview protocol as well as notes from classroom observations. A convenient sample of two school intact groups of seventh-grade students formed a control group of 14 students and a treatment group of 26

students. The total period of data collection lasted approximately four weeks and was conducted in the fall of 2018. The first of the four-week data collection period was dedicated to the collection of data through the attitude towards social studies survey, subject preference survey, and the pre-test on World War One. In weeks two and three the control group of 14 students was taught by the regular social studies teacher using traditional social studies teaching methods such as textbook reading, lecture, anchor charts, worksheets, videos, and maps. They were assessed also in traditional ways using quizzes and tests. The treatment group of 26 students was taught using a thematic unit and integration with the core content areas of mathematics, ELA, and science along with music, art, and literature. Along with tests and quizzes, the treatment group was also assessed using non-traditional methods such as performance tasks and observations.

### **Findings**

The results of the survey of attitude towards social studies and the Likert scale of students' attitude towards social studies reveal that social studies was not a favorite of most students but at the same time they did not mind doing the subject. Thirty-eight percent of students in the treatment group chose social studies as their favorite subject before and after the treatment of the thematic unit. This suggests that the treatment did not produce any change in students' attitude towards social studies. The results also found that students' performance on the unit test increased significantly from pre-test to post-test when both strategies were used (traditional and thematic unit). When the post-test results for both the control and treatment groups were compared, the findings were that the thematic unit made no statistically significant difference in students' academic performance when compared to the traditional methods of teaching. From observations

and the result of the semi-structured interviews, students expressed an enjoyment for most of the activities that were done in the thematic unit (especially the mapwork and music activities), but this did not translate to an overall improvement in their performance on the unit test.

### **Action Plan**

According to Mills (2011) the process of action research is comprised of four steps: identifying an area of focus, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting the data, and developing an action plan. Action research is premised on the idea that some form of action will be taken because of the study (Mertler, 2017). It is not enough just to have concluding thoughts. Concluding thoughts often do not result in an answer to the initial research questions but generate additional questions and further inquiry. Action research is therefore cyclical in nature (Susman, 1993; Mertler, 2017; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

The findings from the research suggest that while a thematic unit is another strategy that can be used to teach social studies content, it does not have a statistically significant difference over the traditional strategies as it relates to student learning in a middle school seventh-grade social studies class. Whereas the original idea was to have the treatment of the thematic unit administered to the control group, as part of an action plan strategy, a deeper reflection on the matter suggests that this will not be feasible for the remainder of the school year as these students have already been exposed to the content and the results would be not be valid due to students' multiple exposure to the information. In addition, time constraint will not allow for the repetition of a unit that was already completed, other than for review in preparation for the SC PASS.

For the remainder of the 2018 – 2019 school year and to address the other social studies units before students take the standardized test (SC PASS) in May 2019, the researcher will meet with the regular social studies teacher to create and implement another thematic unit on one of the remaining units that students need to take, to continue exposing students to the strategy of thematic teaching. Even though the thematic unit used in the study did not produce significant findings over traditional approaches, there was enough evidence from students' reaction (from the lesson activities and semi-structured interviews) as well as in the literature to suggest that it can still be an effective method of instruction. An integrated curriculum provides a holistic approach to learning, rather than an unconnected and fragmented set of lessons, leading to cognitive gains (Mansilla, 2005; Metro, 2017; Loughran, 2005; Yorks & Follo, 1993). Cognitive brain research also supports the theory behind integrated instruction (Caine & Caine, 1994; Moyer, 2016).

Thematic teaching helps students stay focused and excited about what they are learning and can also play a key role in boosting student motivation and improving academic achievement (Davies & Shankar-Brown, 2011). Consequently, for the 2019 – 2020 school year, as part of an action plan there will be an alternating of thematic units and traditional approaches in teaching social studies standards. This will help to create a richer instructional environment and greater differentiation of activities. According to Anderson and Cook (2014) thematic units are well compatible with differentiated instruction and students are appropriately challenged, resulting in less boredom or feelings of overwhelming difficulty.

Another aspect of the action plan will include combining thematic teaching with the traditional methods. In so doing, some aspects of a given topic will be presented using the thematic approach while other aspects of the same topic will be taught with traditional strategies. In this way, the essential knowledge as laid out in the state standards and support document can be addressed through note-taking, textbook, and worksheets, while relieving the feeling of monotony and boredom with enrichment provided by expanding on the information through integration with other subject areas, and simultaneously allowing for students' reaction to the content using real-world scenarios. The combination will provide multiple exposure to the content while at the same time presenting it in interesting student-centered ways. This may seem repetitive but according to Panitz (1999) repetition and memory work serve as a foundation for helping students to develop critical thinking and when students work together the learning becomes interesting and fun despite the seemingly repetitive nature of the learning process.

The NCSS (2018) states that students will “quickly become disengaged when instruction is limited to reading textbooks to answer end-of-chapter questions and taking multiple-choice tests that may measure content knowledge but do little to measure how knowledge is meaningful and applicable in the real world” (p. 2). According to Taylor and Wood (2005) middle school students face complex and diverse content from math, science, language arts, social studies, foreign language, technology, and other coursework without the tools to sort through that material to discern that which is most valuable to them in test taking. Combining thematic teaching with the traditional approaches may help more students to separate the essential knowledge for test-taking from the enrichment activities, while benefiting from both.

The action plan will also see modification to the thematic approach by including or excluding some of the content areas. Changes will include sometimes giving students a choice of activities and subjects that they want to integrate with. Another modification will be to assign different portion of the thematic unit as mini-projects for students to complete in groups and other portions as individual work. At the time the thematic unit was taught, students did not have their MacBooks to complete some of the activities with the use of a technology component. Since then students have been issued their devices and these will make it easier for them to access information on their own. The modifications, blending, and incorporating of technology into the thematic approach will hopefully generate additional questions that may lead to further research into the effectiveness of the strategy of thematic integration.

The plan will include units with more virtual activities to meet the needs of the 21st century learner that our students are. According to Gallardo-Virgen and DeVillar, (2011) states that:

The use of information and communication technologies can complement students' traditional learning through text and spoken language by integrating diverse tools that enhance communication and that include graphical images, animation, audio, video, simulations, as well as three-dimensional models, and virtual worlds. (pp. 2-3)

Units that are developed will also ensure that social justice components receive greater attention with more culturally responsive activities. According to Gay (2013) "Since culture and difference are essential to humanity, they should play a central role in teaching and learning" (p. 1). Gay (2013) adds "To ignore them is to assure that the

human dignity and learning potential of ethnically, culturally, and racially diverse students are constrained or minimized” (p.1). Culturally relevant activities draw on the students’ lived experiences, their cultural and practices and incorporate these in lessons. Traditionally, textbooks and teaching have focused mainly on the experiences of whites and Judeo-Christian experiences to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. Culturally relevant pedagogy ensures that the diversity within a classroom is celebrated and each student feels that his or her lived experiences do matter. Culturally relevant teaching is rooted in teachers respecting students’ day-to-day cultural experiences and building trusting, welcoming, and caring relationships with them (Ramirez & Jaffee, 2016). Lipson, Valencia, Wixson, and Peters (1993) state that:

Units are opportunities to address citizenship goals — the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that we as teachers, parents, schools, communities and provincial and national leaders believe are important for children to learn to be “educated” citizens as well as contributing members of society. As such, we must develop thoughtful units that are coherent and focused as well as meaningful to students. (pp. 2-3)

Social justice issues and equity are becoming a substantial part of everyday educational discussion. The goal of social justice education is “to eliminate educational inequalities among poor, middle, and wealthy economic classes; majority and minority ethnic groups; and the privileged and powerless, as well as to eradicate punitive forms of school accountability” (Cho, 2107, p. 2)

To combat the tendency of students at the middle school level to be reserved in their formal responses to data collection instruments, the action plan will explore



alternative data collection instruments that will allow for more extended responses. These instruments will include but not limited to, peer interviews, focus groups involving friends, having significant others (people they are comfortable talking to) administering the instrument, and incorporating technology (cell phones and social media) in the data collection.

### **Implications for Practice**

While there was no statistically significant difference between the post-test means when students were taught using the traditional methods versus the thematic approach, thematic teaching is still a viable teaching strategy that students can benefit from.

Thematic units increase focus, improves students' interest and engagement, and can lead to more meaningful learning experiences (Horton & Barnett, 2008). Lipson, Valencia, Wixson, and Peters (1993) posit that thematic units provide valuable focus, help students understand why they are doing what they are doing, demonstrate coherent connections among disciplines that allow a transfer of learning from one context to another, help students to grasp the relation of content to process, and facilitate the acquisition of an integrated knowledge base.

While the difference in post-test means between the control and treatment groups was small (1.03), students' response on the semi-structured interviews, the researcher's observations of students, as well as the wealth of information presented in the literature review all point to the conclusion that thematic unit is an effective instructional strategy. The implications are that this method of instruction will be encouraged as a complement to other strategies for teaching social studies. There may be modifications in the way units are structured and taught as well. These modifications may be, for example,

excluding some content areas in the thematic unit while including others. This will depend on the nature of the unit, the topic being presented, and the depth of coverage that is required. Adding or excluding different content areas will save time while also providing the differentiation and essential knowledge that students need. The practice will also reduce predictability of the lesson thus reducing monotony that may develop over time.

Another modification will include incorporating more collaborative activities for students. Strategies such as Think-Pair-Share, literature circles, and jigsaw groupings are collaborative strategies that help students to maximize their learning through interaction with each other. Cooperative learning focuses on the interaction and cooperation among students to achieve mutual goals (Zhang, Meng, de Pablos, & Sun, 2017), nurtures positive interdependence, interpersonal skills, and individual and group responsibility. Herpratiwi, Darsono, Sasmiati, and Pujiyatli (2018) posit that collaborative learning can “improve students’ achievements, knowledge and skills, learning motivation, and self-esteem. Further, it can reduce anxiety and create a harmonious environment. In cooperative learning, knowledge is built through social interaction” (p. 82).

### **Implications for Further Research**

The scope of the present study was by no means exhaustive. The present DiP was focused primarily on the impact that a thematic unit on World War One would have on students’ perception of, motivation to learn, and academic performance in a seventh-grade social studies class at GBMS, a low-income school in rural South Carolina. Further research is needed to examine the impact that such a unit would have on seventh-grade students in schools with similar demographics as GBMS. Silvernail, Sloan, Paul,

Johnson, and Stump (2014) suggest while the level of poverty in a school is the single best predictor of student performance, other factors also play a role in influencing student achievement. Some of these factors include the type of school students are enrolled in, years of teaching experience, and the education levels of teachers. With the preceding factors in mind the use of thematic teaching may have a totally different outcome on students in other schools with predominantly Africa-American students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These other schools may or may not have other support services (Response to Intervention (RTI), Positive Behavior Intervention Services (PBIS), tutoring, and afterschool programs) that may provide a head start for their students, thus ensuring academic success in other areas. Additional research may provide good insight into this.

The impact of a thematic unit approach on other grade levels at GBMS is also cause for further research. While the description provided in the problem of practice and the research setting for this DiP can be applied school wide at GBMS, it may not be safe to assume that the results are transferable. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) state that “teacher-researchers need to understand the quality of the study in order to determine for themselves whether the knowledge shared with them in the form of findings would be potentially useful to them in their own classrooms” (p. 217). Mertler (2017) states that “in action research – the goal is not to generalize findings to other settings but instead to have a clear and in-depth understanding of this particular setting” (p. 141). Similar reasoning can be applied for the need for further research on the impact of the thematic approach on students of more affluent backgrounds in other parts of the state. In addition, the study was conducted with students who were low achievers in social studies. The

impact of thematic teaching may prove different for students who are already self-motivated and are performing at high levels.

Further research is also needed to determine the impact that the thematic unit would have on different gender groupings. Additional studies may reveal whether boys benefit more than girls or vice versa. Additional research may also provide insight into whether each gender group would prefer different activities more than others in a thematic unit. James (2007) claims that the biological differences between boys and girls are responsible for the cognitive differences and the need for males and females to be taught differently. Schramm-Pate (2015) on the other hand, ponders whether male and female children are born with different personalities, interests, and learning styles, or if these are constructed by society based on emphasized norms and values. According to Bonomo (2010) the differences between males and females can be categorized as brain-based, sensory-perception, physical, and biological. Accordingly, she suggests strategies for teaching boys as: Be brief and involve them actively in the lesson; encourage them with quick praise, cut down on written tasks, and use models and rubrics they can follow; lessons should be kinesthetic and experiential; challenge them—boys thrive on competition; keep a close eye on boys but give them large spaces to play; without a physical outlet, their aggressiveness will show up elsewhere inappropriately; use a variety of manipulatives; try to keep the boys from warmer areas in the classroom, they will shut down; males do not hear as well as girls, so move them closer to the instruction. Bonomo (2010) offers the following tips for teaching girls: Girls work well in groups when they are facing one another or the teacher; find activities that allow them to help the teacher; don't protect girls from activities that may cause them to get dirty or skin their knees a

bit, which could promote “learned helplessness”; safe-risk activities provide opportunities for girls to take calculated risks; girls prefer softer voices and enjoy tying lessons into emotions and respond to descriptive phrases; loud, repetitive noise can be distracting and disturbing to girls; girls prefer a lot of colors; use puzzles to promote perceptual and symbolic learning. Since thematic units incorporates the ideas postulated by Bonomo (2010) to varying degrees, further research that include these ideas may yield different results about the impact of the thematic approach.

Finally, the limitations of time of day that thematic units are administered could be insightful as well. In the present study the data was collected immediately after lunch and recess, a time when students were hyped from playing and took a longer than expected time to settle down. It was also evident that following their period of hyperactivity students were then apt to fall asleep. Administering the thematic unit earlier in the day may provide a different outcome.

### **Summary**

Social studies is by nature an integrative subject. It draws from multiple disciplines to create a wholistic view of the human experience. This multi-disciplinary, wholistic approach is often a double-edged sword as the social studies teacher is required to teach a wide range of topics covering many different aspects of human existence sometimes over many centuries. Although ongoing changes in curriculum design, teaching methodology, and administrative practices may have helped to improve students' perception of social studies over the years, an attitude still persists among many students that social studies classes are dull, boring, and irrelevant to their lives (Byford & Chiodo, 2004). Yet it is desirable to have positive student attitudes towards the subject if students

are to do well and fulfill their roles as productive and informed citizens of a democratic society.

The study conducted in this DiP was an attempt to gauge the perception that students in a middle school seventh-grade social studies class have towards social studies that could serve as a possible reason for their lack of motivation to do the subject. Their low academic achievement in social studies was a serious cause for concern. The researcher therefore designed a thematic unit of study as an alternative strategy to the traditional ways of teaching the subject. The unit was effective as it relates to the pre-and post-test results of the both control and treatment groups but showed no statically significant difference when compared to students who were taught using the traditional methods. There is however, a need for further research into the effectiveness of a thematic unit across different grade levels and with students from different backgrounds and gender. The research nevertheless gave valuable insights into the students' perception of social studies and shows that social studies educators have much to do to build students interest in the subject.

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## APPENDIX A

### SURVEY OF STUDENTS' SUBJECT PREFERENCE

Please answer the questions below by checking the one(s) that apply.

1. What is your favorite subject in school?

social studies  math  science  Ela  other

2. Which subject do you like the least?

social studies  math  science  Ela  other

3. Why did you choose \_\_\_\_\_ as your favorite subject?

It aligns with my career choice.

I find it interesting.

My teacher makes it fun to learn.

Other

4. Why did you choose \_\_\_\_\_ as your least favorite subject?

It does not align with my career choice.

The lessons are boring.

I cannot relate to this subject.

Too many tests and quizzes.

I am not given multiple opportunities to express my learning.

Other

5. What advice would you give to the teacher of your least favorite subject?

Ask me what I want to learn.

Vary the teaching strategies.

Use more technology in teaching the lesson.

Make the lesson more relatable to my daily life.  No advice.



## APPENDIX B

### LIKERT SCALE SURVEY OF STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS SOCIAL STUDIES

Check the box that best describe the way you feel about the statement.

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
1.I like social studies.					
2. Social studies is fun to learn.					
3. I like learning about things that happened in the past.					
4. I like the way my teacher teaches social studies.					
5. I do well on social studies quizzes and tests.					
6. I always do my social studies homework.					
7. I would rather not take social studies class.					
8. I don't like to do social studies homework.					
9. I don't like my social studies teacher					
10.Social studies will not help me in the future					

APPENDIX C  
PRETEST/POSTEST  
World War I Test

(Indicator 7-4.1 Questions 1 – 20, Indicator 7-4.2 Questions 21 - 33)

Directions: Underline the correct response to each question.

1. As empires grew, European nations increased their ability to protect land possessions and their citizens through a buildup of arms. This buildup of arms is referred to as:
  - a. Militarism
  - b. Alliances
  - c. Imperialism
  - d. Nationalism
  
2. The competition to set up colonies in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, also known as \_\_\_\_\_, lead to tensions in Europe and ultimately WWI.
  - a. Militarism
  - b. Alliances
  - c. Imperialism
  - d. National

3. All throughout Europe, a strong feeling of \_\_\_\_\_, developed as countries united and loyalty to one's homeland and culture became increasingly important to people.
- Militarism
  - Alliances
  - Imperialism
  - Nationalism
4. In order to keep a balance of power, and keep the peace among nations, European nations formed \_\_\_\_\_, with a pledge to send support if needed in times of trouble or war.
- Militarism
  - Alliances
  - Imperialism
  - Nationalism
5. This tragic event caused by Gavrillo Princip and the Black Hand ignited the powder keg that led to the Great War
- The sinking of the Lusitania
  - The explosion of the USS Maine
  - The assassination of Vladimir Lenin
  - The assassination of Franz Ferdinand
6. WWI was fought between which two alliances?
- Axis Powers and Allied Powers
  - Redcoats and Bluecoats

- c. Reds and Whites
  - d. Central Powers and Allied Powers
7. Where did the fighting on the Western front take place?
- a. Austria-Hungary and France
  - b. Belgium and Bosnia
  - c. France and Germany
  - d. The Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria
8. Which of the following was not part of the Triple Entente or later the Allied Powers?
- a. Great Britain
  - b. Russia
  - c. France
  - d. German Empire
9. Which of the following was not part of the Triple Alliance or later the Central Powers?
- a. German Empire
  - b. Austria-Hungary
  - c. The United States
  - d. The Ottoman Empire
10. Which of the following weapons, along with trench foot and diseases, increased the number of casualties during World War I?
- a. Atomic Bomb, Flamethrower and Poison Gas
  - b. Long Range Artillery, machine guns, and Flamethrower

- c. Atomic Bomb, Horses, and Zeppelin
- d. Hydrogen bomb, Swords and Horses

11. World War I left millions dead, and even millions more wounded. Which of the following best describes the reason for so many casualties never seen in prior wars?

- a. Better military leaders served in World War I
- b. It was the first war to feature gunpowder
- c. It was the first war to feature modern weaponry
- d. Less sanitary conditions existed for the troops



12. With modern weapons increasing casualties to number never previously seen before in warfare this new battlefield warfare saw soldiers dug into fortified mud and dirt bunkers to avoid artillery and machine gun across from their enemies often charging into an empty or destroyed landscape known a No Man's land to often disaster filled results even in victory

- a. Blood and Iron
- b. Guerrilla warfare
- c. Submarine warfare
- d. Trench warfare

13. Which of the following effects of World War I helped contribute to the Russian Revolution?
- a. Russia wanted to join the Central Powers
  - b. Germany surrendered to Russia
  - c. Russia suffered heavy casualties during World War I
  - d. Russia was left out of the Big Four at the Treaty of Versailles
14. In 1917, Russia pulled out of World War I. What event(s) caused Russia to take this action?
- a. Heavy defeats by the Allies
  - b. A civil war within Russia
  - c. Defeat of Russia by the Germans
  - d. A declaration of peace by Czar Nicholas II
15. Which statement best describes the relationship between World War I and the Russian Revolution?
- a. World War I gave Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks the opportunity to seize power in Russia
  - b. World War I postponed the Russian Revolution by restoring confidence in the Czar
  - c. The Russian Revolution inspired the Russian people to win World War I
  - d. World War I gave the Czar's army the needed experience to suppress the Russian Revolution

16. In 1918 Russia pulled out of WWI ceded territory to the Central Powers by signing this treaty?
- Treaty of Ottoman-Lenin
  - Treaty of Detente
  - Treaty of Breste-Litovsk
  - Zimmerman Treaty
17. Why did President Woodrow Wilson and the United States enter into the war late?
- It had many disagreements with all countries involved.
  - It traded with all the countries involved.
  - It was maintaining a policy of isolationism.
  - It did not have the military strength at the beginning
18. Congress voted to declare war on Germany for several reasons. Which of these contributed to Congress's decision to declare war on Germany?
- The Zimmerman Telegram
  - The sinking of the *Lusitania*
  - Germany's submarine warfare
  - All of the above
19. What was the impact of the entry of the United States into WWI?
- The war ended as a draw.
  - The Allies defeated the Central Powers.
  - The Central Powers defeated the Allies.

- d. The US negotiated a peace treaty that ended the war without further fighting



20. This mostly African American group of US soldiers fought in WWI earned this nickname from their German opponents as a sign of respect for their bravery and fierce fighting in battle.

- a. Brooklyn Bombers
- b. Jersey Redcoats
- c. Harlem Hellfighters
- d. Dover Demon Dogs

21. One goal for a lasting peace that President Woodrow Wilson included in his Fourteen Points was

- a. establishing a League of Nations
- b. maintaining a permanent military force in Europe
- c. returning the United States to a policy of isolationism
- d. blaming Germany for causing World War I

22. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points were based on the belief that

- a. military strength is a nation's best path to world peace



- b. isolationism should guide international relations
- c. the principle of self-determination should be applied to people of all nations
- d. industrial nations should have equal access to colonial possessions

??????
<b>Take the blame for the war</b>
<b>Pay reparations to the Allies for damages</b>
<b>Restrictions on the size of the army and navy</b>
<b>Give up Alsace-Lorraine and all overseas territories</b>

23. What political document placed these restrictions on Germany after WWI?

- a. The Treaty of Paris
- b. The Treaty of Versailles
- c. The United States Constitution
- d. The Declaration of the Rights of Man

24. How was the Treaty of Versailles affected by the Fourteen Points?

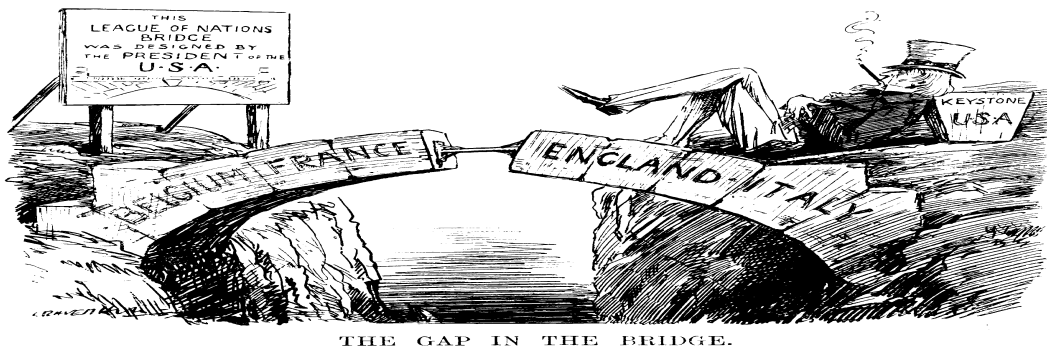
- a. It was mostly based on the 14 Points
- b. They had nothing to do with each other
- c. It went easier on Germany than the 14 Points
- d. The Treaty was much harsher than the 14 Points was, leading to resentment.

25. What was the war guilt clause?

- a. The United States paid citizens of Europe, as a result of their guilt for destroying their homes
- b. Germans were forced to accept guilt for World War I, and pay reparations
- c. Gavrilo Princip, guilty of starting World War I was put to death
- d. Britain was forced to accept guilt for World War I, and pay reparations

26. Why did United States Senators vote against the United States joining the League of Nations?

- a. They wanted to avoid future European wars.
- b. They did not think the US could afford to maintain an army.
- c. They did not believe the US army was capable of fighting again.
- d. They believed the US had fought on the wrong side during the war.



27. What is the best interpretation of this political cartoon?

- a. The US joined the League of Nations.
- b. The US was the weakest member of the League of Nations.
- c. The League of Nations was weak because the US did not join.
- d. The League of Nations was strong even though the US did not join.

28. What was one of the terms imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles?

- a. Germany refused to accept aid from other countries.
- b. Germany was ruled by a coalition of European nations.
- c. Germany was forced to make reparations to other European nations.
- d. The German military was increased.

29. How did the Treaty of Versailles change political boundaries, or geographical boundaries, in Europe?

- a. France, Great Britain, and Italy suffered territorial losses.
- b. Austro-Hungarian Europe was rewarded with colonies in Africa, Australia, and India.
- c. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was dissolved, and Germany suffered significant territorial losses.
- d. Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire demanded to be a part of the League of Nations as an American ally

30. This nearly eight-hundred-year-old empire and Central Powers members was dissolved and divided up onto several new Eastern European countries and allowed for the creation of the Middle East?

- a. Mongol Empire
- b. Ottoman Empire
- c. Turkish Empire
- d. Byzantine Empire

31. The new nation of Yugoslavia created after WWI included several nationalistic and ethnic groups including this group \_\_\_\_\_ which involved in the events that ignited the powder keg known as WWI.
- a. Albania
  - b. Austria-Hungary
  - c. Serbia
  - d. Turkmenistan
32. The newly created “mandate” countries created in the Middle East such as Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon fell under the control of which European powers?
- a. France and Britain
  - b. France and Germany
  - c. Britain and Russia
  - d. United States and France
33. This British declaration promised the Jewish people a new nation of their own in Palestine.
- a. Burgess Declaration
  - b. Collar Declaration
  - c. Balfour Declaration
  - d. Samuels Declaration

## APPENDIX D

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How do you feel about the thematic unit that you have just completed?
2. Did you learn better from this strategy than from other strategies that your teacher used previously? How?
3. How did the thematic unit differ from the other strategies that have been used to teach social studies?
4. Do you prefer to be taught using thematic units, or some other strategy? Explain.
5. Does the use of a thematic unit change the way you feel about social studies? How?

## APPENDIX E

### 10 – POINT GRADING SCALE

<b>South Carolina Uniform Grading Scale Conversions</b>				
<b>Numerical Average</b>	<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>College Prep Weighting</b>	<b>Honors Weighting</b>	<b>AP/IB/Dual Credit Weighting</b>
100	A	5.000	5.500	6.000
99	A	4.900	5.400	5.900
98	A	4.800	5.300	5.800
97	A	4.700	5.200	5.700
96	A	4.600	5.100	5.600
95	A	4.500	5.000	5.500
94	A	4.400	4.900	5.400
93	A	4.300	4.800	5.300
92	A	4.200	4.700	5.200
91	A	4.100	4.600	5.100
90	A	4.000	4.500	5.000
89	B	3.900	4.400	4.900
88	B	3.800	4.300	4.800
87	B	3.700	4.200	4.700
86	B	3.600	4.100	4.600
85	B	3.500	4.000	4.500
84	B	3.400	3.900	4.400
83	B	3.300	3.800	4.300
82	B	3.200	3.700	4.200
81	B	3.100	3.600	4.100
80	B	3.000	3.500	4.000
79	C	2.900	3.400	3.900
78	C	2.800	3.300	3.800
77	C	2.700	3.200	3.700
76	C	2.600	3.100	3.600
75	C	2.500	3.000	3.500
74	C	2.400	2.900	3.400
73	C	2.300	2.800	3.300
72	C	2.200	2.700	3.200
71	C	2.100	2.600	3.100
70	C	2.000	2.500	3.000
69	D	1.900	2.400	2.900
68	D	1.800	2.300	2.800
67	D	1.700	2.200	2.700
66	D	1.600	2.100	2.600
65	D	1.500	2.000	2.500
64	D	1.400	1.900	2.400
63	D	1.300	1.800	2.300
62	D	1.200	1.700	2.200
61	D	1.100	1.600	2.100
60	D	1.000	1.500	2.000
59	F	0.900	1.400	1.900
58	F	0.800	1.300	1.800
57	F	0.700	1.200	1.700
56	F	0.600	1.100	1.600
55	F	0.500	1.000	1.500
54	F	0.400	0.900	1.400
53	F	0.300	0.800	1.300
52	F	0.200	0.700	1.200
51	F	0.100	0.600	1.100

## APPENDIX F

### ASSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

*THE IMPACT OF A THEMATIC UNIT AND INTEGRATION ON STUDENTS'  
ACHIEVEMENT IN SOCIAL STUDIES*

#### KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY:

You are invited to volunteer for a research study conducted by Mr. Holness Samuels. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education at the University of South Carolina. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact that a thematic unit on World War One may have on students' motivation, perception, and achievement in social studies. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are in the seventh-grade. This study is being done at Green Branch Middle School and will involve approximately twenty-six volunteers.

This form explains what you will be asked to do, if you decide to participate in this study. Please read it carefully and feel free to ask questions before you make a decision about participating.

#### **PROCEDURES:**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will do the following:

1. Be assigned to a control group or treatment program by chance. You do not have a choice over which group you will be assigned.

2. Complete a subject preference survey, an attitude towards social studies survey, a pre-test on World War One, a posttest on World War One, and maybe an interview about your views on the thematic unit on World War One.

3. Have your discussion/interview recorded in writing to ensure the details that you provide are accurately captured.

**DURATION:**

Participation in the study involves ten lessons over a period of 10 school days. Each lesson will last 1 hour.

**RISKS/DISCOMFORTS:**

There are no risks or discomfort to you outside of your regular classroom activities.

**BENEFITS:**

Taking part in this study may help to increase your motivation to do social studies and to assist you to perform better on social studies assessments.

**COSTS:** There will be no costs to you for participating in this study.

**PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS:** You will not be paid for participating in this study.

**CONFIDENTIALITY OF RECORDS:**

Information that is obtained in connection with this research study will remain confidential. Study information will be securely stored in locked files and on password-protected computers. Results of this research study may be published or presented at seminars; however, the report(s) or presentation(s) will not include your name or other identifying information about you.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free not to participate, or to stop participating at any time, for any reason without negative consequences. In the event that



you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept in a confidential manner. If you wish to withdraw from the study, please call or email the principal investigator listed on this form.

I have been given a chance to ask questions about this research study. These questions have been answered to my satisfaction. If I have any more questions about my participation in this study, I am to contact Mr. Holness Samuels at 803-574-2102 or email [hsamuels@clar1.k12.sc.us](mailto:hsamuels@clar1.k12.sc.us).

I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form for my own records.

If you wish to participate, you should sign below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject / Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Consent

**I have read this parental permission form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my permission for my child to participate in this study.**

Parent's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

A copy of this parental permission form should be given to you.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Qualified Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date