

**Meeting the challenges of issues-centered instruction with “low-achieving” students**

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**Description:** Many teachers do not explore inquiry-based instruction with students they perceive as “low-achieving”. This paper explores the experience of our mentoring a teacher to attempt problem based historical inquiry with students she believed were “low-achieving” and the impact that mentoring had on her thinking about her discipline, her students, and her teaching.

**Summary:** Inquiry-based history instruction is rare in most school settings, but particularly in classes of students who are perceived to be “low achieving.” This is particularly true in social studies classes. Students with low reading abilities or test scores typically receive instruction focused on rote recall of historical information. Because teachers and students face great obstacles in inquiry based learning, often teachers are reluctant to attempt complex instruction with students they perceive will struggle. A fear of the students being unable or unwilling to perform complex tasks is one major component. A second obstacle is that there are few models of exemplary inquiry-based instruction for teachers to learn from. This paper explores a mentoring relationship involving classroom teachers and teacher educators, working to implement problem based historical inquiry with a class of students perceived to be “low-achieving”. Teacher educators and one classroom teacher experienced with problem based historical inquiry, mentored a teacher new to this type of instruction.

The experience indicates the mentoring relationship significantly shifted the novice teacher’s view of her discipline, her role in teaching that discipline, and her students. She learned to view her discipline as more complex and controversial as opposed to a uniform narrative passed down by experts. She also learned to use instructional scaffolding, modeling, and motivation to guide, support, and encourage her students through the complex tasks. Finally, she realized her students were not apathetic, but bored and actually quite capable of complex reasoning, historical empathy, and ethical decision-making. Though, not generalizable, this paper provides important evidence that indicates teachers can and should provide students opportunities to engage in inquiry-based history instruction.

**Abstract:** Inquiry-based history instruction is rare in most school settings, but particularly in classes of students who are perceived to be “low achieving.” Students with low reading abilities or test scores typically receive instruction focused on rote recall of historical information. Teachers and students face great obstacles in inquiry based learning, so often teachers fail to attempt complex instruction with students they perceive will struggle. This paper explores a mentoring relationship involving classroom teachers and teacher educators, working to implement problem based historical inquiry with a class of students perceived to be “low-achieving”. Though, not generalizable, this paper provides important evidence that indicates teachers can and should provide students opportunities to engage in issues-centered history instruction.

**Key Words:** diverse learners; low-achieving students; inquiry-based instruction; urban education; scaffolding

## Meeting the challenges of issues-centered instruction with “low-achieving” students

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### Introduction

Even though inquiry-based instruction has been envisioned by John Dewey (1933) and championed by Hunt and Metcalf (1955), Oliver and Shaver (1966), Newmann and Oliver (1970), and Engle and Ochoa (1988), it has not been adopted in the majority of our social studies classrooms, especially in classrooms with students who are perceived to be “low achieving” (Rossi & Pace, 1998). Teachers often believe that only advanced level students are capable of complex reasoning and critical analysis, therefore students perceived as low-achieving receive typically rote, low-level instruction (Metz, 1978; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Gamoran & Nystrand, 1992; Onosko, 1991). Saye and Brush (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004) have studied the struggles and successes of teachers as they sought to implement Problem Based Historical Inquiry (PBHI). In their studies, Saye and Brush consistently used regular education classrooms that included students with diverse racial backgrounds, socioeconomic levels, and multiple learning levels. This paper will examine the experience of one teacher attempting PBHI for the first time in an impoverished school in the rural Southeast, with a class that included 30% special needs students. The questions guiding our study were:

- What impact does a collaborative effort of teacher educators and classroom teachers have on meeting the challenges of PBHI with “low-achieving” students?
- What shifts might occur in a teacher’s thinking about students and the discipline of history as a result of planning and implementing PBHI?

### Overview of the Problem

Advocates and theorists in social education have advocated issues-oriented social studies classrooms for almost a century (Dewey, 1933; Hunt & Metcaf, 1945; Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Newmann & Oliver, 1970; Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Social studies instruction centered around

complex, societal questions is seen as the best approach for preparing citizens to reason together to make decisions about the public good (Parker et. al, 1989). Decision making about social problems require unique skills and a different type of reasoning than more bounded problems of science or mathematics (Perkins, Allen, & Hafner, 1983). Social problems are controversial, ill-structured, and multi-logical and require decision makers to consider and weigh competing perspectives and arguments. (Parker et. al, 1989, Perkins et al. 1983).

Newmann (1991) noted five competencies critical to higher order reasoning in social studies. Citizens must able to (1) empathize with multiple points of view; (2) apply abstract concepts to specific situations; (3) infer beyond limited facts to draw logical conclusions; (4) engage in discourse to clarify understanding of the nuances of the issue; and (5) apply evaluative criteria in developing a defensible decision about a social problem. A competent citizen authentically considers all perspectives and arguments openly before making a decision (Parker et al., 1989). In order to enter into open dialogue and consideration of multiple points of view on a problem, the thinker must shift their assumption about the nature of knowledge from a view that knowledge is directly knowable from an outside expert to a view of knowledge that is collaboratively constructed by the knower (Windschitl, 2002).

Most classrooms do not feature inquiry practices (Goodlad, 1984; Shaver, 1996). This trend has been attributed to a number of factors including the disposition of the teacher, pragmatic concerns such as class size, lack of support or even chastisement from peers, and the intense effort involved in inquiry based instruction (Onosko, 1991; Rossi, 1995; Saye, 1998b; Schlechty, 1993; Windschitl, 2002). Other significant factors in teachers failing to adopt inquiry practices include beliefs about students' capabilities, especially adolescents perceived as low achieving (Metz, 1978; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Gamoran & Nystrand, 1992; Onosko,

1991), and the belief among some educators that inquiry practices are inappropriate for the developmental level of adolescents (King & Kitchener, 1994; Leming, 1994). Additionally, factors common to low achieving students, such as lack of motivation, low reading abilities, and lack of interest in public issues exacerbate the tendencies of educators see inquiry practices as too daunting for this population (Rossi & Pace, 1998). This trend raises concerns for the future of a democratic society dependant upon a citizenry able to engage in civic dialogue regarding enduring societal questions.

Underlying these practical concerns facing teachers are the constructivist assumptions about knowledge, students, and classrooms. If these are in conflict with the teachers' belief structure and epistemology, they will choose to use a more behaviorist approach to instruction their disposition and belief structure about their discipline and their role as teachers (Kuhn, 1999; Onosko, 1991; Scheurman, 1998; Schulman, 1986). Teachers' beliefs about the nature and purpose of history and social studies may lead them to incorporate more didactic forms of teaching than framing the instruction around controversial issues (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Evans, 1989, 1990). Numerous studies indicate teachers' understandings of the concepts and methods of the discipline influence their willingness to engage their students in inquiry (Merryfield, 1998; Wilson & Wineburg; 1988; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991; Yeager & Davis, 1995). However, beliefs may not even be enough. Shaver (1996) suggests teachers must be comfortable with ambiguity, nuance, and controversy to effectively engage their students in an authentic exploration of social problems.

When social science instruction is centered on social problems, significant obstacles exist for both teachers and students. A lack of instructional models of teachers successfully engaging students in the exploration of and eventual decision-making about social problems is an obstacle

for many teachers. Without such models, teachers are unlikely to take the necessary risks needed to improve their practice because they will not plan adequately for the instructional supports students will need (Shaver, 1996). Teachers and students engaging in the exploration of social problems through critical reasoning find that they must develop a deep knowledge base about the topics involved. Researchers also find students struggle to persist in the exploration of a complex problem (Newmann, 1991; Onosko, 1991; Rossi, 1995) and authentically entertain multiple points of view on the issue (Newmann, 1991; Parker et al., 1989).

Knowing students will struggle with various aspects of issues-centered social studies learning, the role of the teacher in supporting the students through these obstacles becomes essential to their success. If students are going to make defensible decisions about social problems, they must ground their inquiry in the disciplinary strategies used by the experts (Scheurman & Newmann, 1998). Teachers must provide essential guidance, balancing the need to provide instructional supports that model expert thought processes, without restricting or impeding the spontaneous, divergent thinking of a constructivist environment (Windschitl, 2002). According to Rossi and Pace, teachers report this practice is daunting and exhausting, both physically and cognitively (Rossi, 1995 & Rossi & Pace, 1998).

Because the cognitive demands of issues-oriented learning are so high for both teachers and students, teachers need to collaborate with like-minded practitioners and researchers to develop a more sophisticated understanding of this complex practice. Hiebert (2002) found when teachers collaborate with practitioners and researchers around a set of shared principles for instruction, they become more sophisticated in their understanding of inquiry practices and committed to continuing to develop them with their students.

### Study Design and Methodology

This project continues a larger project started by Saye & Brush (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004) studying teachers using Problem Based Historical Inquiry (PBHI) to structure learning around two overarching principles: (a) units are centered on a persistent, ill-structured question requiring students to evaluate evidence and defend an argument; and (b) students' exploration is supported through deep content research, embedded disciplinary expertise, teacher probing, multiple perspectives, multiple intelligences, and collaboration (See Table 1). These teaching practices have been incorporated into a technology-enhanced support network (<http://www.pihnet.org>) that provides model lessons, instructional design tools, classroom video cases, and forums intended to foster professional growth and collaboration.

Because of the complexity involved in PBHI, we nurtured six mentor teachers in a collaborative effort to plan and implement a PBHI unit during the 2003-2004 academic year. To develop a common language and experience with PBHI instruction, we held group reflection meetings where we asked the teachers to reflect together about the challenges and benefits of PBHI instruction. The collaboration amongst the mentor teachers began to develop a shared professional knowledge, integrating teacher craft knowledge with research-based knowledge (Hiebert et al., 2002). These six teachers then participated in a 2004 summer workshop of teachers new to PBHI providing anecdotal evidence of the challenges and benefits of PBHI for students.

#### *Participants*

From the summer workshop participants, we created two mentor/mentee teams, of which this paper highlights one. In the case discussed in this paper, our study teacher (Dana) worked with a mentor teacher (Ann) as they jointly designed two lessons for a PBHI unit during the

2004-2005 school year. The university team provided guidance in keeping the unit centered on the two principles of PBHI listed above while the mentor teacher provided the craft knowledge teacher trust (Hiebert, 2002). Ann (mentor) was teaching modern U.S. history to 6<sup>th</sup> graders and Dana (mentee) was teaching the same course to 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Dana's case provided a unique opportunity to study not only her first attempt at PBHI, but also the use of PBHI with a population of "low achieving" students. Dana's concerns about her students' abilities to succeed with this approach were consistent with research (Rossi & Pace, 1998). She worried they were unmotivated, had poor reading skills, and had little interest in or knowledge of public issues.

Because Dana and Ann taught in schools over three hours driving time from each other, the group met twice at the university for an all-day development session but all other planning was done electronically through on-line forums on the PIH web site and e-mail. Besides the geographic distance between the two schools, the socio-economic gap was also wide. Dana's school is located in one of the poorest counties in the nation (Table 2). Her students come to school with a variety of challenges facing them, most significantly extreme reading challenges. Four students were reading on a 4th grade reading level. The state requires a graduation exam taken in their sophomore year and twice a year until they pass it. The test covers four core subjects and of the 21 students in this class, only two students successfully passed the social studies portion of the exam as sophomores. Further, seven of her twenty-one students were special education students included into a regular education classroom for the first time in their academic careers. Finally, her students appeared to her to be apathetic, showing little interest in history or current events. Because of these challenges, Dana had not used inquiry-based instruction with this group of students. In addition to the novelty of the experience for her students, this would be Dana's first experience teaching a PBHI lesson requiring historical

perspective, analysis of evidence, and dialectical reasoning. In this lesson, her students would make a value judgment on the behavior of historical figures by answering the question: When is the government justified in limiting civil liberties?

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

We collected data from three perspectives in multiple formats: (a) from her students we gathered their written work and video taped the class sessions on the Congressional Hearing; (b) from Dana, we collected transcripts of two planning sessions, her on-line journals, pre- and post-implementation interviews, and her reflections after watching clips of her video during the summer following her unit implementation; and (c) as researchers we kept on-line research journals and transcripts of our weekly research meetings. To analyze this data, we reviewed the transcripts, videos, and forum journals to look for themes and patterns about Dana's thinking regarding her challenges, her ideas about meeting those challenges, and how teaching this unit impacted her thinking about her teaching and her students. We focused our analysis on the challenges Dana faced in conceptualizing, planning, and implementing PBHI instruction with her students, the role of the support network in her conceptualization, and any shifts in her thinking about history, PBHI instructional philosophy, her students, and her practice. We used analytic induction, typological, and content analysis to guide our analysis of the data (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). Staff researchers analyzed and coded data independently and met to compare findings, develop and refine categories, and produce data-based speculations about the findings' implications for Dana's view of her discipline, her students, and her role as a teacher.

### *Findings*

Dana demonstrated perseverance and flexibility in her first attempt with PBHI practices. Though she faced several challenges, she demonstrated the possibilities issues-centered

instruction holds for low achieving students when they are supported. Our analysis focuses on the impact this collaborative experience had on Dana's view of (1) her role as a teacher; the discipline of history; and (3) the capabilities of her students.

### *Dana's View of her Role as Teacher*

#### *Motivation*

Dana reported that the testimony and advice given by Ann (her mentor) was invaluable in motivating her and providing practical assistance in implementing the unit with her students. Because motivation was a concern of both teachers, the team drew decided to incorporate a "grabber" which would on explore the value conflict in the topic in a way that was personally relevant to the students (Onosko & Swenson, 1996). Ann developed a "grabber" to introduce the value conflict of security v. freedom to her sixth grade students. After an incident occurred at a Friday pep-rally, Ann had the principal come to the class and announce he was canceling all subsequent pep rallies. The students debated the fairness of this decision with Ann transitioning their conversation to an exploration of the parallel value conflict in the Palmer Raids of the 1920s. Based on Ann's example, Dana designed a fictitious "official announcement" from the prom sponsor initiating a mandatory breathalyzer test at the junior-senior prom. She led a discussion on the fairness of this decision, which paralleled the arguments surrounding the Palmer Raids. When asked about the grabber, she reported, "A riot almost ensued and they really got involved in thinking about that. From time to time I would bring that up again because they really took that to heart." During the preparation for the hearing, Dana said, "Whenever the students were getting lost in the time period, I would remind them of the prom issue. That really helped them see the importance of the question and consider both sides because they personally

related to the question.” She reported that the grabber for the unit gave the central question a personal relevance to her students, making it an authentic problem they cared about solving.

### *Modeling*

In addition to the idea for a grabber, Ann also encouraged Dana to model a Congressional Hearing presentation for her students. Ann took one of the characters not being performed by a student and demonstrated the presentation for the class, making clear they should be in the first person. Dana took Ann’s advice and reported on the forum, “I really think one thing that helped them empathize was my modeling a speech for them – play act, not report the research they had done. During their presentations, they were a bit stilted at first, but as they continued in the role and interacting with other members of the class, they started taking on the roles and enjoyed the play acting. I hadn’t originally planned on letting the historical characters begin debating with each other, but once the controversy started emerging, the group members were itching to ask questions and that was when things really got interesting.” By setting an example of a quality performance, she provided clear expectations of historical accuracy and empathy (Wiggins, 1993).

### *Instructional Scaffolding*

Dana’s students were unaccustomed to a socio-constructivist approach to history (Windschitl 2002) requiring both independent and collaborative work as they construct their own understanding of a complex historical event. The team knew scaffolds would play a major role in supporting the students through each stage of the preparation and implementation of the hearing. The team determined the students would need documents providing multiple points of view on the Palmer Raids and accompanying scaffolds to guide their comprehension. They would also need scaffolds to move them from comprehending their assigned perspective to

making an argument in the form of a poster, speech, or questions. Ultimately there would need to be an assessment of their ability to evaluate the central question by stepping out of their assigned role and judging the multitude of ideas presented in the hearing. The students would become Senators and write a letter to their constituents defending their vote on whether the Palmer Raids were justified using historical evidence for support. Dana reported at the end of the experience, “Without the guidance of the university team, I would never have developed all the scaffolds. I had no idea how helpful those would be in supporting my students’ preparation for the hearing. I will use these ideas in planning future activities with them, now that you’ve shown me how to take them step-by-step through the research, preparation, and implementation of the activity.”

*Reading Comprehension.* One particularly rich example of the collaboration between the practicing teachers and the researchers came while working to support the students with low reading abilities in comprehending the historical perspective they were assigned to portray in the hearing. The university team took the job of writing first-person narratives from eight historical points of view, which would provide the basis of the background knowledge for the eight presentations. Dana reported she could “never had written those historical characters because I would never have had time to do the research you did to write them.” However, both teachers wanted reading comprehension questions to accompany the first-person historical narratives, but the researchers resisted making the activity too “school-like”. As a compromise, we decided to try imbedding reading comprehension questions after each paragraph or two in the character sketch to encourage the group to pause and discuss together the information they had just read. In her post-implementation interview, Dana said, “One of the best things was the decision to put those questions in the reading. I think with the embedded questions, it made the group stop and

discuss the reading before they moved onto the next section. This helped all the students in the group understand the basic perspective of their character, even if they struggle to read it themselves.”

*Effective Group Work.* Another concern of Dana was whether or not her students would work effectively in groups. The team created four interdependent roles for each of the historical perspectives. Each group consisted of the “historical character” assigned to give a speech in first person at the hearing. They had an attorney who would ask them supportive questions in order to clarify their position and assist when they answered questions from the senators. A graphic artist would draw a poster that would visually represent the ideas put forth in the speech. Finally, a senator would research the four historical figures representing the opposing side and prepare critical questions for each of them. Because Dana was concerned her students would not know how to begin to make a poster, write a speech, or write questions, the team created specific scaffold for each role to assist the students in preparing and increase the likelihood of success. Dana’s important task was to consider her student’s strengths and assign them to an appropriate role. Dana found great value in having an important role for each student to play that required independence and cooperation with their group, particularly for her special needs students. “I think the way the lesson was set up with multiple activities and roles, I could assign those students a role where they could contribute and be productive. Even if they weren’t strong readers, they could take the concepts and make a poster or cartoon.”

Dana knew she needed to carefully assign roles to students to match their abilities and learning styles so the entire class would benefit. “One of the most crucial decisions in this class was putting them in groups and making sure there was at least one strong student in every group, a student who would take a leadership role. I did not let them choose the roles, I assigned them

their roles. I wanted to make sure the primary role would actually talk. There were a lot of difficult types of roles so that made sure everyone felt included or engaged. I also knew of the eight historical characters there were four key perspectives to be presented to the class, so I chose my most talented students for those groups. I needed to make sure those perspectives were represented by a student who wouldn't mind talking and debating." The instructional materials created by the team, not only scaffolded Dana's students' learning in the Congressional Hearing, they also scaffolded her understanding of instructional supports necessary in socio-constructivist learning environments.

*Progress Checks.* Because Dana had not seen evidence of rigorous, academic work from this class of students in previous units, she decided to demand rough drafts of the speeches and in the future plans to do the same for the posters and questions. "I had them do a rough draft of their speeches and I looked at them and gave suggestions. I would say 'this is a really good point so bring this out.' Looking back, this probably would have helped with the questions. I should have them generate a list of ten questions and look at them. I shouldn't just wait and see the finished product." During their preparation, she circulated throughout the room reviewing their work, questioning their positions, probing for deeper answers, and answering countless questions. She noticed that they wanted to find the "right answer" instead of inferring a logical response based on the information available (Windschitl 2002). "They called me over a lot because they weren't sure they were doing this correctly and wanted reassurance they were doing it right. I think I did lead them a little more than I wish I would have. I wish I would have let them struggle a bit more on their own. Because I haven't done anything like this, they were so unsure of themselves. I finally had to stop at some groups and say there might be more than one right answer. Maybe I should have them read it and have them tell me what they just read or

look at this sentence and tell me what they thought it meant.” Dana noticed by the end of the activity her students were becoming more comfortable making a decision about what their answer should be. “I watched them improve over the week with the interpretive part of it and not looking for just exactly what I wanted them to say.” This evidence suggests not only did Denise’s view of the discipline of history shift, but her students’ view began to slightly shift as well.

One of the significant dilemmas of supporting students in socio-constructivist environments is providing instructional supports without removing the authentic spontaneity constructivist learning theory requires. There is a constant tension between providing students with instructional scaffolds to support them when they need it, but not overly structuring the learning environment so that it stifles divergent and creative thinking. Because of the learning challenges and novelty of the experience with Dana’s students, we knew scaffolds would play a critical role but we worried the unit would become just one worksheet after another. Dana was concerned her students would be overwhelmed with the number of scaffolds and procedures if she showed it to them all at once. Therefore, Dana decided to motivate them by explaining they would be preparing for a Congressional Hearing and would be “voting” as Senators on the Central Question: When is the government justified in limiting civil liberties? This gave them a purpose for each activity, but instead of giving them all the scaffolds at once, she explained each task on a “need to know” basis and only gave them the scaffold they needed in that stage of their preparation. She said, “They worked very well in their groups. I broke it into smaller segments and only gave them little bits at a time.”

*Dana's View of History*

The first and most important shift for Dana was an epistemological change in her view of the nature of historical knowledge. In the past Dana had taught the 1920s as a list of fun and interesting facts. In working to develop this unit, she was now being challenged to consider the ethical questions and value conflicts between freedom and security, which exposed areas where her historical knowledge was lacking. Dana reflected, “Before this, this wasn’t a topic I really knew a lot about. Teaching the 1920s has always been a fun period, but now seeing these connections of the political climate to today, it was really interesting for me to go back and do some reading and research, read some novels, dug up movies. Also, that idea of teaching history through that persistent question, I think it really helps students and teachers – keep coming back to the same question. The students have to grapple with the different perspectives of people disagreeing about an important question. Now when I get questions such as ‘why do I have to study this?’ the Persistent Issues approach answers that question. I hope the students will say – oh we talked about this before and see those links.”

In broadening her understanding of the controversy surrounding the Palmer Raids, Dana read secondary sources, historical novels, and watched a movie about the Palmer Raids in order to increase her understanding of the time period. “There's a wonderful scene about 3/4 of the way through the film *Reds* where the police raid John Reed's home looking for evidence of communist sympathies - I think they even mention Palmer. I don't know if we want to try to use a film clip but this is a wonderful movie about the early socialist party (I had seen it years ago but had forgotten the gist of it). It's definitely too mature and too long for students but there are some good scenes that might capture the essence of the period. I'm also reading *Ragtime* - I hope to watch that movie soon.” This quote provides evidence of the effort Dana put into not only

researching the various perspectives on the Palmer Raids, but also considering ways to use those materials to engage her students in the issues.

Dana concluded that she had fallen into a rut in her teaching with her “regular” class. This experience caused her to re-evaluate her approach to history with this group of students. “They’re so apathetic, but they’ll remember these characters on the graduation exam. We’re so test driven, but if they’re not taking ownership, they’re not learning it. Expect more – hold higher standards.” She realized her students were not apathetic, but bored because they saw no relevance in learning history. She came to recognize that students respond favorably when they are required to grapple with meaningful questions, explore various perspectives, and deliberate together about the best solution to social problems. She realized that lower order, knowledge based tests do not have to mean lower order, knowledge based teaching. By engaging her students in PBHI, she feels she increased the likelihood of their success on the graduation exam, or at least for the items connected to the 1920s.

Dana acknowledged that because her role as the teacher shifted, she will need continued work in the role of facilitator. “I like the facilitator role and I’m bouncing back and forth between that and the teacher at the front. It’s difficult because there is so much more preparation. You have to be clear about expectations, but I like this model. I don’t think I’ve fully embraced it yet, but I do like having the students being historians, researchers, and taking a more active role in their learning.” She went on to say that she struggled with a desire to give them the answer instead of letting them investigate and draw conclusions. “The work is different, the background work. You have to give up the limelight and let them struggle some, which is hard, because I know the answers, but I needed to let them struggle without jumping in too quickly to save them.”

*Dana's View of Students*

Dana's reluctant implementation of PBHI with her "regular" class of students created significant shifts in her thinking about her students and her teaching. She saw her students differently after the hearing and vowed to make significant changes in her future teaching practices with them.

During Dana's post-implementation interview, she said:

I was very, very nervous about doing this lesson with this class. My feeling immediately after doing this, I was humbled, because they did a great job. They were interested and interesting. They worked well in groups. I was amazed they bought into this like they did and took ownership of the roles. They were very excited about it. The last day of class, a couple of the students stayed after and wondered if we could start a debate club because they really enjoyed the back and forth. At the beginning of the year, only two of these twenty students had passed the graduation exam. This was a low-achieving class and really rose to the occasion. I have not been expecting enough of my low-achieving students. If I set the bar higher, they will rise to the occasion. That really did humble me to see I've been letting them get by without challenging them enough. If they're interested and it's structured well, it was really rewarding.

Her quote is evidence of a fundamental change that occurred when she watched her students demonstrate complex historical reasoning as a result of her carefully developed instructional supports for the hearing. She saw her students engaged at a level not previously experienced in prior units. She was skeptical they could handle the complex reading, empathy, argumentation, and analysis required to successfully debate the ethical question of whether or not the Palmer Raids were justified. She now believes that all students, regardless of label, are capable of complex historical reasoning when engaged in authentic tasks supported by instructional scaffolds.

In a later reflection, we asked Dana how her experience impacted her impression of her students. She said:

"The biggest impact it's had is it's changed my thinking about working with the less motivated or achieving students. I've not been expecting enough of them,

letting them off the hook. If I hold them to higher standards, they'll perform. I've been teaching thirteen years and I've forgotten they'll do what I expect them to do. They're capable of doing some pretty sophisticated thinking and preparation. Especially with these struggling students, I had begun to buy into their "we can't do this." I had been doing things like this with my more advanced classes, but this made me rethink what I do with struggling students."

After this experience, Dana expressed appreciation for the support she received through the PIH network. Dana said, "I would never have tried this or visualized how to support my students through such a complex project on my own. Each week, the forum discussion gave me more clear picture of how to use scaffolds to guide their exploration of this topic." She felt she could not have developed these materials in isolation which supports other research demonstrating collaboration develops more professional knowledge among teachers (Saye, et al. 2005). Even though her first attempt was challenging and even a bit stressful, Dana stressed she will continue because of the excitement she saw in her students. Her classroom was a different place and she was encouraged to see her students enthusiastically participating in an activity that required a great deal of complex thinking. She expected apathy and got enthusiasm. She will do this again to improve her own skills as an inquiry-based teacher and continue developing the investigative, analytical, and communication skills she saw emerge in her students.

### Implications

Dana's experience provides many lessons and inspires future questions as we explore the possibilities and challenges of engaging typically "low-achieving" students in PBHI. Dana demonstrated that under the right conditions, teachers can succeed in engaging "low-achieving" students in complex historical reasoning. She was able to motivate her students to engage in a level of empathy, analysis, and debate not frequently seen.

The most important question, is what allowed for her success? First, the questions we ask students to consider matter. Both Dana and her students were motivated by the important

question upon which the lesson and unit were centered and the authentic task in which they were engaged. By shifting her 1920s unit from an exploration of a number of interesting events to an investigation of a critically important, and personally relevant question, both she and her students were willing to put forth a great deal of effort.

Secondly, Dana's experience indicates that collaboration with both researchers and practitioners is an ideal setting to encourage teachers to engage in this challenging style of teaching. The support of the Persistent Issues in History Network provided craft knowledge through her mentor teacher and research-based professional knowledge through the university team. This corroborates other studies demonstrating when teachers and universities collaborate in long-term projects, teachers gain a more sophisticated professional understanding of their practice (Saye, et. al, 2005; Hiebert, et. al. 2002). These findings raise another question based on the implications of this study: How far can researchers move the practices of teachers unfamiliar or uncomfortable with inquiry-based practices? This study suggests we can move an inquiry-oriented teacher much further and much more quickly than a teacher who is inclined to resist inquiry-based practices (Saye & Brush, 2004). We have plans to continue dialoguing with Dana as she continues using this unit in subsequent semesters, monitoring the adjustments she makes to the unit and changes in her thinking about the unit, her students, and teaching.

Dana's success with this lesson and her testimony about not expecting enough of her "low-achieving" students inspired us to write this paper. We saw in her experience students who previously had been lifeless come alive and think carefully and rationally about a complicated issue relevant today. Dana's experience gives great hope to those who argue history education should be taught with the clear purpose of preparing tomorrow's citizens to tackle complex societal questions (Barton & Levstik 2004, Saye & Brush 2004) and those who have advocated

for the inclusion of all students in complex inquiry activities (Rossi & Pace, 1998). Pre-collegiate social studies is the most important avenue for preparing tomorrow's citizens. Dana's students provide clear evidence that all students are capable of complex historical reasoning. What is required are teachers who can and will make it happen. There is a great deal of research needed in terms of what is required of teachers to help "low-achieving" students succeed in evaluating complex historical and societal questions. While this study is not generalizable, it adds to a long line of inquiry that indicates when teachers collaborate, they are more likely to take the necessary risks to engage students in meaningful learning about complex societal questions. We plan to continue this line of inquiry as we work to make social studies classrooms places where all students learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for democratic citizens.

**Table 1. Dana and Ann's PBHI Unit**

<p><b>Topic:</b> 1920s in U.S. History</p> <p><b>Persistent Issue:</b> In what circumstances is the government justified in limiting personal freedoms?</p> <p><b>Unit-specific Central Question:</b> Was the government justified in limiting civil liberties during the 1920s?</p>
<p><b>Culminating Activity:</b> Students will be divided into groups according to the various topics covered in the unit, such as Palmer Raids, Prohibition, Scopes Trial, etc. Each group will create a museum display answering the central question related to their specific topic. At the "museum opening" the students will visit the various exhibits, noting the interpretation of the curators. They will then write a review of the interpretations and the implications for history.</p>
<p><b>Unit Progression:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The instructor introduces the unit by having the class experience and then debate the justification for a school-based example of the school administration limiting the personal freedoms of students. For example, Dana told students there would be mandatory breathalyzer tests at prom. The teacher links this example to the Persistent Issue and the Unit-specific Central Question and introduces the culminating unit activity.</li> <li>2. Teacher provides an overview of major events during the 1920s highlighting the consistent struggle between freedom and security/peace: Prohibition, Scopes Trial, immigration restriction, Palmer Raids, etc.</li> <li>3. Students analyze political cartoons in three ways on three topics: Whole class evaluates</li> </ol>

cartoons on immigration restriction, small groups analyze cartoons on the Scopes Trial, individual students create cartoons on the question of Prohibition.

4. Students study one of eight perspectives on the Palmer Raids (four government and four anti-government witnesses). They prepare testimony and questions for a Congressional Hearing on the Central Question.
5. Students prepare and display the museum exhibits.

### **Illustrative Lesson – Congressional Hearing on A. Mitchell Palmer’s Raids**

Attorney General Palmer and J. Edgar Hoover arrested 10,000 “radicals” and “leftists” for endangering the government.

1. Expert Groups: Students are assigned one of eight groups. Each group is responsible for becoming an expert on the views of one person representing either a pro or anti-government position. Government: A. Mitchell Palmer, Henry Ford, a small business owner, a police officer; Anti-Government: Eugene Debs, Emma Goldman, an immigrant worker, and a priest.
2. Prepare Testimony: In each expert group, there are four roles: Historical Impersonator, Lawyer, Congressional Committee Member, Graphic Artist. In these groups they help prepare a speech for the historical figure, the attorney prepares questions for their client, the Senator prepares questions for the four witnesses on the opposing side, and the artist prepares a graphic representation of their main points.
3. Hearing: The class hears testimony from the eight witnesses, listens to the lawyer ask questions, then asks their own questions of each witness. Senators are free to debate with the historical figures.
4. Conclusion: Students step out of their assigned roles to debate the Central Question.

**Table 2: Census Data on Harper County**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Harper County</b>	<b>United States</b>
High School graduate	65%	80%
Bachelor’s Degree	8%	24%
Average income	\$25,807	\$41,994
% living below poverty line	27%	12.4%
Free/Reduced lunch	75%	----
White residents	40%	75%
Black residents	60%	12%

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