Motivating Students to Read through Project Based Learning

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Motivating Students to Read through Project Based Learning

By

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M.S. Literacy Education

Supervised by

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Abstract

This study examined how Project Based Learning (PBL) motivated students to read content area texts. Data was collected though observations, student questionnaires, recordings of student presentations, and student created artifacts. The data shows that students were motivated to read content area texts because they were allowed to work collaboratively and given choices through PBL. Not only were students more motivated to read, they also used a variety of literacy skills such as comprehension and discussion throughout the process of creating their projects. The data also shows that students worked together and problem solved to successfully complete their projects. Teachers who implement PBL into their classrooms will see an increase engagement in their students while fostering the development of essential skills in their students.
Motivating students to read through Project Based Learning

As an eighth grade social studies teacher, I know that not all students enjoy learning about history or are very excited to read assigned texts in social studies. Project Based Learning (PBL) can motivate students to connect with content area texts while increasing their knowledge of a topic (Friedman & Heafner, 2008). PBL is a way to engage students and give them ownership over their own learning. This method of instruction allows students to choose and create their own authentic assignments to demonstrate their knowledge of a topic. Since students are creating and guiding their own learning, PBL takes teachers out of the center of instruction and allows the students to work together to creatively demonstrate their understanding of the content. Project Based Learning engages literacy skills of students, from reading, writing, speaking, and synthesis of information. By giving students ownership over their learning and having them choose a way to demonstrate their understanding, they are more motivated to complete a given task (Bell, 2010). No longer are students asked to recall and recite facts back to the teacher; they are engaged with the material, making it more meaningful to them.

Without further research and implementation of PBL in more classrooms, students who are not traditional learners and do not read content areas texts will continue to have difficulties engaging in school. Many students simply do not see the incentive to read assigned texts, and as a result, their learning is impacted. All students will be helped with the implementation of PBL. Not every student can connect with teacher based instruction and will connect with assigned texts. Project Based Learning allows students to choose and create projects therefore giving them more ownership of their learning. This will not only increase student motivation but will also increase student levels of success (Bruce, 2009).
This study was conducted with four eighth grade students in three social studies classrooms to see if Project Based Learning motivated students to read content text. The findings of this study show that students had a greater level of autonomy through Project Based Learning therefore increasing their motivation and engagement. Through Project Based Learning, students gained valuable literacy skills and demonstrated greater levels of comprehension. Students also gained important skills in organization and collaboration as a result of working with others to create their projects.

**Theoretical Framework**

Literacy is much more than just simply reading and writing. Literacy includes all forms of communication and interaction between people; including their speech, body language, and gestures. The way to learn literacy is to interact with others in a social setting. Larson and Marsh argue that literacy is not something that can be taught through rote learning. Literacy is not reading a novel, writing, and answering questions, but rather, literacy means being able to interact with others.

Literacy is something that people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 10).

Therefore students need to interact with each other to increase their literacy. By interacting, students will know how to use their skills in today’s society. PBL is a method of teaching that
can engage students in a social setting therefore helping students to improve and practice their literacy skills. Students are engaged in creating a project together and communicating the results to the people around them. Students will be applying multiple literacy skills throughout the creation of their product together. This type of learning is more motivating to students because they are not just learning a rote set of skills, but rather are engaged in the process of creating and collaborating with others (Bell, 2010).

Students acquire literacy through acquisition. Students mainly learn the skills they need by doing rather than being explicitly taught. Once they have the opportunity to immerse themselves and practice their skills, they have more ownership over them and their literacy skills increase. Learning skills in isolation is not as effective of a method because students need that social aspect to truly take ownership of their skills (Gee, 2001). Through Project Based Learning, students can practice and continue to develop their literacy skills. Project Based Learning requires more than just reading and writing it draws upon all aspects of a child’s literacy skill set (Hammond, 2010).

Sociocultural theory suggests that literacy is participation in social, cultural, and historical contexts that are facilitated by interactions with others (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Sociocultural theory implies that literacy is a social practice. In order for students to practice and improve their skills, students need to be able to interact with and collaborate with others. This element is essential to facilitate growth in students. In keeping with the sociocultural theory, the PBL method of instruction promotes student collaboration. In PBL classrooms, students work together to create a product that demonstrates their knowledge while allowing them to improve their literacy skills. In this social setting, learning occurs and students not only strengthen their
knowledge of a given topic, they further develop their literacy skills. Engaging students in a social manner through PBL will help them achieve greater levels of success.

It is also important to recognize that different types of literacy instruction are needed to ensure that students are literate for today’s world. Components that made earlier generations literate are not the same as they are for today’s students. Teachers should see a “child as an active member of a constantly changing community of learners in which knowledge constructs and is constructed by larger cultural systems” (Larson & Marsh, p. 100). Therefore, children learn by actively engaging in authentic meaningful activities. PBL engages students in hands on activities in which they are active members and as a result will foster further development of their literacy skills.

Another important piece of literacy acquisition is making the connection between in and out of school literacies. Connecting these two types of literacies is becoming increasingly important in today’s world and should allow students see the relationship between reading and writing and how they are used in the real world. Authentic activities make the connection between in and out of school literacies for the students. Through Project Based Learning, students create authentic projects that demonstrate their understanding of a topic and can connect their in and out of school literacies together to build upon their literacy skills. The teaching of literacy needs to match what students need to be literate in today’s society. Traditional methods of teacher led instruction cannot always provide students this type of learning experience. Students need that opportunity of applying their skills in authentic, social settings.

**Research Question**
Since literacy is a social practice that students need to be active participants in, this action research project asks how does Project Based Learning motivate students to read content area texts?

**Literature Review**

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a student driven method of instruction that allows students to learn through inquiry while collaborating with their peers and creating projects to demonstrate their learning (Bell, 2010). Student involvement and choice are essential elements of PBL. In contrast to traditional methods of instruction, PBL teachers become facilitators of student learning as they guide students through the learning process (Bell, 2010). The PBL method of instruction leads to increased student motivation, has many positive impacts on students, and allows teachers to differentiate to accommodate student needs. On the other hand, PBL changes the roles of teachers in the classrooms and can pose potential problems for teachers who are not used to the PBL method of instruction.

**Motivation**

A positive benefit of PBL is that students are more intrinsically motivated in what they are doing. As a result of the increased motivation, students put more effort into their learning. They like what they are doing; therefore they spend more time and effort on it (Jones, 2003). One reason for the increase in student motivation is student choice. Students can choose what resources they will use to gain knowledge of a particular topic and what will be created in the end. Students feel a sense of ownership over what they are learning and as a result are more intrinsically motivated (Bell, 2010). Choice is also given to students as they decide what type of
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project they will create to demonstrate their learning of the topic of study. Through PBL, students “change their conceptions of themselves as learners, away from receiving knowledge and toward authoring knowledge” (Jones, 2003, p. 442). In other words, because students make the choices, students become more motivated and engaged in the learning because their choices reflect their interests not those of the teacher in charge. As a result, students become more in control of their own learning.

Student motivation increases with PBL because students are actively engaged in the task at hand. They choose the project that suits them best, therefore their learning becomes relevant to their lives (Bezon et al., 2007). Students will be more engaged and motivated when they feel like they can connect with what they are learning. PBL gives them this sense of autonomy and ownership over their learning.

In a 2007 study conducted by Bezon, Haar, Hugg, and Wurdinger, teachers at Dakota Meadows Middle School in Mankato, Minnesota were surveyed about the use of PBL in their classroom and the impact that this method of teaching had on student engagement in their classroom. Teachers reported in surveys and through interviews that their students were more motivated and more engaged in what they were learning. These teachers allowed students to choose their own projects and work collaboratively in groups. The authors reported that the factors of working collaboratively and student choice increased the motivation of the students (Bezon et al., 2007). In PBL, “students appeared to be much more engaged with this process as opposed to other more passive methods of learning where teachers do most of the talking” (Bezon et al., 2007, p. 159). Because the students in this study were engaged in a nontraditional style of learning, their attitudes about school changed. The students were more motivated because they were actually doing the learning and not just sitting and receiving the information.
Additionally, a 2005 study by Gultekin also found that students had greater motivation when engaged in PBL. When students are motivated to complete a given task, the learning becomes more meaningful to them (Gultekin, 2005). Tasks which students find boring or lack motivation in are not as meaningful. Gultekin conducted a study with 40 fifth grade students in two social studies classrooms. The students were engaged in doing a research based project, and as a result were more engaged and motivated to learn about what they were learning. They were able to explore their topic through their own research, and in the end, the results of their journey were more meaningful to them as opposed to a teacher centered approach to instruction.

Another factor that led to increased motivation was that the participants worked collaboratively to complete their project. Being able to work with other students also increased the students’ level of motivation. Gultekin’s research shows when students are engaged in what they are learning, they make more meaning from it resulting in a deeper understanding. PBL engaged these students and made them more motivated in social studies.

Similarly, Pflaum and Bishop (2004) also found that students were more motivated and enjoyed reading when they got to work together. The students interviewed liked being able to ask their peers questions and consult with the people around them. Consequently, the type of reading that students did not enjoy and therefore were less motivated to complete, was when they had to read out loud to the class or when they had to read by themselves. They felt they did not have as much support. Students who work as a team through PBL stated that they liked that they were exploring and finding new information together (2004). They could then bounce ideas off of each other and help each other, demonstrating further engagement into their learning.
Allowing students to create projects through different modes also increases student engagement and motivation. De La Paz and Hernadez-Ramos (2009) compared two eighth grade social studies classrooms, one that was using the PBL method of instruction and one that was using a more traditional approach to instruction. The researchers found that students in the PBL classroom students had a high level of engagement in social studies when they created multimedia documentaries to demonstrate their learning of westward expansion. The students stated that they enjoyed working on the project and that this project helped increase their knowledge of westward expansion. Thus PBL resulted in greater learning for these students. The students also enjoyed working collaboratively with others to complete this project. The skills that the students gained from working collaboratively and with the technology used would be transferred to future projects the students created (2009).

The researchers of this study also found that in comparison to the non PBL school, students in the PBL class demonstrated greater understanding and knowledge of the content. Because students were so heavily engaged in their multimedia project, their knowledge of the content increased (De La Paz & Hernadez-Ramos, 2009). In order for students to do well, “it is critical that students should want to learn about the subject matter they are being exposed to in schools, not just to pass tests” (De La Paz & Hernadez-Ramos, 2009, page #). Student motivation and what they learned went hand in hand.

**Positive impacts of PBL**

Project Based Learning teaches students different skills that they will need throughout their school career but also in their daily lives in the workforce. One skill that students develop through PBL is how to work collaboratively. By working collaboratively, students learn how to
communicate. Students learn how to have their own discussions and actively listen to what their group members are contributing (Bell, 2010). Throughout the process, students learn how to be respectful of others’ ideas and opinions in order to work together to solve the problem presented to them through PBL. These skills will be important for students to have throughout their entire lives. When teachers set a goal and expectation for effective collaboration between group members, student collaboration increases; therefore further promoting communication skills between students (Chang, 2008).

Another important aspect of PBL is the student created design process. PBL is a student centered approach driven by student choices. PBL puts students in the driver seat of their own learning. Students create their projects from the designing and planning stage all the way through to the finished product. Throughout this process, students learn much more than just the content, they learn the skills of designing and creating their own work. Rudolph and Wurdinger (2009) found that the three most important skills that students learned through PBL were responsibility, self-directed learning, and time management. These three skills are essential for student success in PBL. In order for students to successfully complete their projects, they need to be able to budget their time and work towards achieving the goals that they set. According to Rudolf and Wurdinger, “this approach [PBL] allows students to learn the important life skills, and instills confidence and the desire to become self-directed lifelong learners” (p. 125). PBL teaches students much more than just the content of the topic they are exploring. It gives them the skills that they will need to be successful and students can apply these skills to all facets of their lives.

Another important skill that students develop through PBL is problem solving. When working on projects collaboratively with others, there are bound to be discrepancies between
group members. For example, groups might find conflicting information while doing research on a particular topic or disagree on how they should go about completing assigned tasks. It is important that students learn how to solve these disagreements and continue on their path to completing their project. Teachers that were interviewed in Rudolf and Wurdinger’s (2009) study stated that their students showed an improvement in their problem solving skills. Not only were these students more engaged in their learning, they were also learning how to resolve their own problems. It is by working through these types of challenges that students develop problem solving skills. The teachers also noted that they saw their students applying problem solving skills and strategies on a daily basis. PBL developed the problem solving skills of these students and as a result of using these skills, levels of student success increased.

Critical thinking is another skill that is enhanced by the use of PBL in the classroom. Students who are engaged in PBL research information on a particular topic in greater depth in order to create their culminating project. Students move beyond the basic factual knowledge of a topic and begin to delve deeper and think critically about their topic (Hammond, 2010). PBL also allows students to dig deeper by looking at different perspectives on their topic. As students see their topic from different angles, they gain more knowledge of the content and as a result feel more connected and engaged with what they are learning (Boyer et al., 2008).

Integrating technology into PBL assignments helps to not only motivate students but also improve their technology skills. Given the opportunity to work with technology helps to incorporate students’ in and out of school literacies while exposing the students to the content that they need to know. Multimodal projects are another form of PBL that allow students to demonstrate their learning in different ways. Having students use different types of technology in PBL will increase their skills with those types of technologies over time (Kimber & Levy,
2009). Students will learn how to use the technology and how to improve their projects that are created with technology with repeated exposure to the technologies. Kimber and Levy found that students, who used PowerPoint to create projects over the course of two years showed an increase in the skills necessary to use PowerPoint. Over that two year period, student skills in project design, quality of the information, and cohesion of the project greatly improved. By using technology such as PowerPoint to demonstrate students’ content knowledge, they are increasing their skills necessary to use technology and complete these types of projects. These skills that students acquire can be transferred to many different projects across different content areas as well as be used out in the real word once students graduate and join the workforce. PBL teaches students a variety of skills that will enable them to be successful.

Additionally, PBL promotes the skills of making inferences, predicting, and interpreting (Wu & Krajcik, 2006). Students are able to move beyond lower level skills of recall and knowledge level to these higher level thinking skills. In a 2006 study conducted by Krajcik and Wu, students were asked to create their own charts and graphs through PBL. What the researchers found was that students called upon these higher level skills such as predicting and interpreting and as a result gained a greater understanding of the concepts. They learned much more than just how to create graphs and charts; they were able to see the purpose behind them and the relationships between the different concepts they were studying. Through PBL, students harness higher level thinking skills which lead to higher levels of learning and achievement.

Moreover, PBL can be used interdisciplinary therefore incorporating skills across content areas. By allowing students to create authentic projects, they can demonstrate their learning in a variety of different ways. The projects created might be through different genres of writing therefore incorporating English language arts, drawing incorporating art, and many more. These
interdisciplinary projects allow students to practice and draw upon their many strengths while demonstrating their learning and creating authentic work (Garran, 2008).

A final benefit of PBL is a greater long term level of student retention of content. Through creating meaningful projects in the classroom, students are able to remember the content. In a 2008 study by Friedman and Heafner, two social studies classes were compared. One class was engaged in creating Wikis on World War II, while the other class was taught through more traditional methods of instruction. The researchers concluded that the students who had created the wikis remembered more of what they learned about World War II months later than their peers in the traditional classroom. Not only did they remember the facts of World War II, they also remembered their projects. The process of creating the wikis helped them to better retain the content. The researchers found that, “Students in the test class delineated their discussion of the factors, contributors, and events of World War II categorically as they had visually displayed on their wikis” (Friedman & Heafner, 2008, p. 299). In this case, the wikis were helpful to the students not only in their learning of the content, but also of student retention of the content. The way in which the students categorized the topics of World War II on the pages of their wikis helped them to remember the facts much later. PBL allows students to create and take ownership over their own learning and in the long run remember more of what they have learned.

Differentiation

Not all students are alike and each student has different needs that need to be addressed in order for them to be successful in school. PBL allows for differentiation in material that will lead to greater student success. One group of students who benefit from differentiation are struggling readers. Struggling readers have been seen as unmotivated or apathetic about their
schoolwork; however, many struggling readers are not unmotivated and want to do well. Many struggling readers are embarrassed by the fact that they are struggling and do not want their peers to know that they do not understand what they read or what is being taught. Through classroom observations and interviews, Hall (2007) concluded that these types of students want to succeed, however not at the expense of looking stupid in front of their classmates. These students would not use some of the strategies taught in class because they felt, “I’m already behind as it is. They [the other students] don’t need to know that. These things [comprehension strategies] will just make it worse” (2007, p. 136). Struggling readers in this study were willing to sacrifice their grades and learning in order to be perceived as smart. PBL is a way to differentiate and provide appropriate materials to each student. Students would also be able to work through their difficulties together to promote a greater understanding and struggling readers would no longer have to hide.

PBL provides differentiation in instruction to meet the needs for more students in the classroom. Through PBL, students’ self image can be improved (Doppelt, 2003). Students who thought that they were not smart enough or did not connect with more traditional methods of teaching would experience greater success with PBL. Research from Dopplet’s three year study found that low-achieving students could experience success and create authentic projects using the PBL method:

Every teacher has to encourage his pupils to think, to use their knowledge, and to apply their own ideas to authentic projects. Any teacher, who creates such a climate, discovers that pupils, even under-achievers, get involved in the learning process and choose their own goals for learning. As a result of these changes in the classroom framework, the pupils become better learners (Dopplet, 2003, p.270).
Dopplet found that the lower-achieving students went through the entire process of creating their projects from design to building and documenting their progress. As a result of their success and what they had achieved, the students’ self image increased. These students were not able to connect with a traditional style of teaching. PBL provided them with a motivating and challenging environment in which they could succeed.

Traditional teaching methods simply do not meet the needs of every student sitting in the classroom. Some students need alternative ways to demonstrate their learning as traditional methods do not always fit. Bruce (2009) found that lower achieving students had high literacy skills; however, they were not motivated by conventional methods and could not display their skills in a traditional way like most students in his classroom. In his study, Bruce had his lower achieving group of students create a video project to demonstrate their composition skills in his English Language Arts class. He was shocked by what he found: “though these students were self-reporting struggling writers with print, they were successful in completing parallel composition skills using video” (2009, p. 280). Based on Bruce’s research, traditional methods were not meeting these students’ needs. These students could demonstrate their skills through PBL and their media project. Part of the project that these students completed asked them to analyze lyrics to a song that they were going to use in their video. Even though these students typically did not connect with text, they could connect with and have a conversation around their interpretation of the lyrics. These same students had difficulties doing this with the text. However, through PBL their skills were able to be seen in a different way.

Additionally, PBL can allow students to display their knowledge in new ways that are relevant to their lives. When given the opportunity to create projects that better suite their needs students “demonstrated literacy levels much more sophisticated than the tasks required by many
school-based assessments” (Gainer, 2008, p. 29). Some students need different ways to show their learning. By allowing them to choose the method that suits them best, students can really demonstrate how much they know.

Struggling readers can also benefit from the PBL method of instruction. Another way to present this type of instruction for these students is through learning clubs (Casey, 2009). In these clubs, students are working together to achieve a common goal. Since literacy is a social practice, students improve their literacy skills through their interactions with each other in the learning clubs (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Learning clubs allow students to help each other while they engage with texts. The students facilitate the meetings in the clubs. Students create a product that demonstrates their learning and outcome of the meeting (2009). Casey (2009) concluded that struggling readers were more motivated and achieved greater academic success as a result of working in these learning clubs. The central theme in these clubs, as with most PBL approaches, is that students work together and are given choices to meet the instructional goals. Students in these clubs rotated the different roles and responsibilities, making sure that each person had a job to do and was supported by the other group members. Different groupings of students were used depending upon the topic that was being studied and how the groups could best support the needs of all of the students. This type of PBL was successful for these students because they were engaged with what they were doing, had a choice in their learning, and were as a result, invested in and committed to becoming better readers and writers (2009).

**Role of the Teacher**

In comparison to traditional teacher driven instruction, PBL changes the role of the teacher and puts students in the center of their own learning. Some teachers openly embrace the
PBL method of instruction while others refuse it and are sticking to their traditional teacher centered form of instruction. One of the reasons for the preference in teaching styles is the teacher’s own learning style. Frequently, the teacher’s method of instruction seems to mirror their own learning preferences (M. Rosenfeld & S. Rosenfeld, 2006). Teaching in accordance with personal preferences can become a problem because just because the teacher learns best one way does not mean that it is the best teaching method for the students in their classrooms. PBL allows students to choose how they want to learn and allows them to make it fit their individual needs.

Another example of the shift in teacher roles is that teachers help scaffold the learning of their students. With this type of approach, students are able to have their own meaningful discussions and as a result lead to greater student understanding (Krajcik & Wu, 2006). Teachers who use the PBL method of instruction do not stand in the front of the room and lecture. They are letting the students control their own learning through their projects. Teachers help guide the students through the materials and support that they provide them. When problems arise, teachers are there to guide the students and point them in the right direction; however students are still at the forefront of their own learning. As a result of the change in the role of the teacher, students gained more from their learning experiences, which led to greater understanding and mastery from the students (2006).

Potential Problems

Some teachers fully embrace the PBL method of instruction while others are resistant to it (M. Rosenfeld & S. Rosenfeld, 2006). Those who are opposed to PBL see problems with this method of instruction. Because of these potential problems they feel that they would rather stick
with a more traditional method of instruction. Potential problems of PBL include student learning, time on task, assessment, and high stakes testing.

One potential problem that is raised by some educators is the amount that students actually learn through PBL. Teachers have seen an equal level of achievement between students engaged in PBL and those engaged in a more traditional style of teacher led instruction (Jones, 2003). However, some teachers reported that students have gaps in their knowledge as they learn more about some subjects through PBL and less about others. Through their projects, students can delve deep into a topic. In Jones’s study, “one teacher said that students received some good information from the Internet and that they received a better understanding of biomes because he did not go into as much detail about biomes in his traditional class”(p. 457). In traditional classes more of a breadth of topics is covered, however, it is not always the case with PBL. Some teachers have a problem with that fact, especially those who are concerned about test scores.

Another potential problem that teachers might face in PBL is some students might spend less time on task as compared with more traditional lecture style of teaching. Projects that require students to use technology might cause students to experience technical difficulties requiring them to spend more time correcting their technical problem and less time learning the content that is being asked of them. In addition, teachers were also concerned about students working in groups. In groups in which students are having difficulties working together, more time is spent on organizing team members and less on the task of actual learning (Jones, 2003). With a more traditional method of instruction, teachers can control these factors and have better control over how much time students spend on task.
An additional issue that is raised by PBL is the issue of assessment. Some teachers are resistant to PBL because they feel that it is too hard to assess student learning. Instead of grading pen and paper tests, teachers are grading authentic projects. Some teachers feel that grading the authentic projects is “messy and student projects are difficult to guide and evaluate” (M. Rosenfeld & S. Rosenfeld, 2006, p. 386). Grading student created projects requires more time and effort on the part of the teacher. Grading becomes more challenging and time consuming because the projects look different depending upon what the students choose and how they decide to go about creating them. Since PBL puts students in charge of directing their own learning, everyone’s projects will look different and may produce different outcomes. It is up to the teacher to respond according with their grading and adapt their grading to accommodate PBL.

Furthermore, teachers might also feel the stress of standardized tests and No Child Left Behind Act. Some teachers feel that they simply do not have time for PBL because of standardized tests and the pressure for their students to perform well. Because of these tests, teachers might not have as much control over their instruction as they might like as they feel pressure from administrators to “teach to the test.” As a result, teachers might be resistant to implement PBL and stick to more traditional style of teaching (Garran, 2008). Many teachers feel more comfortable with traditional methods of instruction because they are at the center of and are the givers of the knowledge. Additionally, PBL requires more instructional time because the students are researching and then creating authentic projects to demonstrate their learning. Many teachers feel that they do not have enough time to devote to this type of instruction and as result stick to more traditional methods of teaching.
The research makes clear that PBL leads to increased motivation in students. Not only is increased motivation a positive for students, other positive benefits include, the gaining of life skills such as collaboration, problem solving, and critical thinking. Challenges to PBL include assessment, student learning, time spent on task, and the pressure of teachers from high stakes testing. Despite these challenges, teachers that are willing to change their role to more of a facilitator of learning see the positive results and an increase in motivation in their students.

**Method**

**Context**

The research for this study was conducted at School X, which is located in a suburb of Rochester NY. In 2009 School X was redesignated as a National School to Watch. School X enrolls 731 students grades six through eight. 88% of the students that attend School X are Caucasian, 8 % is Asian or Native, Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 2 % is Hispanic, and 2% is African American. 1% of the student body at School X is eligible for free or reduced lunch. For the purpose of this study, two eighth grade social studies classrooms will be used. Both classes are general education classes. The first class contains 26 students and the second class contains 20 students.

**Participants**

In this study, I looked at four students in the two social studies classrooms---two from each class. Two of the students are girls and two are boys. All of the names of the students used in this study are pseudonyms.

Emily is a thirteen year old girl. She typically has a B average in social studies. She is quiet and does not usually participate in class. Homework completion tends to be a bit of an
issue for Emily. She frequently would fail to complete assignments in social studies. Emily enjoys playing a musical instrument and spending time with her family.

Nicole is a thirteen year old girl who comes from a middle class family. She is an honors level student who frequently participates in class. In social studies, Nicole’s average is an A+. Nicole plays a musical instrument, is a member of the debate club, and is also a peer helper. This year she also ran for student government.

Patrick is a fourteen year old boy. He is an A average level student who frequently participates and is excited about social studies. Patrick comes from an upper class family. He is one of three triplets. Patrick loves to play soccer and will be traveling to Italy this summer to play in many soccer tournaments with his brothers.

Kasey is a fourteen year old boy. Kasey came to the School X district in 5th grade after he moved with his family from Maine. He is an honors level student who takes two classes at the high school. His average in social studies is an A+. Kasey enjoys social studies, however is sometimes bored because he grasps concepts more quickly than the rest of his classmates. He enjoys playing soccer and lacrosse.

**Researcher Stance**

In this study, I took on the role as an active participant observer. An active participant observer is one that is actively engaged in teaching and observing the outcomes that their teaching has on their students (Mills, 2007). I am the teacher of both social studies classrooms and observed the students while teaching. This is my third year teaching, and my second year teaching eighth grade social studies. I have a NYS teacher certification in secondary social
studies grades 6-12. I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher College pursuing a Master’s Degree in Literacy.

Method

During this study, students were given a project to complete in pairs. They completed their research on the important aspects of a president’s administration, created a project of their choosing to demonstrate their learning, and presented these projects to their classmates to teach them about their president. The students completed this project in one week and then presenting them to their peers.

Throughout the entire process, I was an active participant observer. I observed the students as they worked together on their projects. I took notes on what I observed and heard from the groups. I looked to see how the students interacted with each other, what roles they took on, how they problem solved, their levels of engagement in the project, and what they learned from this project based learning activity.

After the students completed their project, I gave the four students a questionnaire (Appendix A) about their levels of engagement in their projects. The questionnaire asked students about the whole process of creating their project as well as their opinions of it and their learning preferences. I asked the students follow up questions to the questionnaire. To collect further data, I also analyzed the students’ completed projects. When I looked at the projects, I looked for the level of effort the students put in to them as well as evaluated them to see if they met the criteria and to what standard they did so.

Quality and Credibility of Research
The research that I collected for this study is of quality and credible. Mills (2007) defines credibility as “the researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained” (p. 105). In order to ensure credibility, I did prolonged observations at the study site. Since it is my own classroom, I was able to spend lots of time in the study site and have a good understanding of the students. During the course of the project, I observed the classes for 7 days, 39 minutes each day. I also practiced triangulation by comparing a variety of data sources to cross-check the data (Mills, 2007). To do this, I analyzed three types of data sources: field observation notes, questionnaires, and student artifacts. By using these three different methods of data collection, I gained much more information for my study. In addition to using the student created artifacts, I also videotaped the students’ presentations and used these videos as another form of “slice-of-life” data to ensure credibility in my research.

Another important aspect to my research was dependability. Dependability is “the stability of the data” (Mills, 2007, p. 105). In order to do this, I overlapped data collection methods by practicing triangulation to make sure that I compensated for each of the method’s weaknesses. Another way that I ensured dependability was by establishing an audit trail. I had my critical colleague review my process of data collection and the interpretation of the data. My critical colleague gave me written feedback to help me throughout the research process.

**Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants:**

Before I started my research, I got consent of both my participants and their parents to use the students in the study. I also protected the rights of the participants by gaining their consent because I informed both the students and the parents of the nature of the study and what
their role entailed. In gaining consent of the participants, I spoke to the students and explained my study to them and what I needed them to do. I went over the consent form with them and asked them if they had any questions. I also explained to the students that if they did not want to participate they did not have to and that it was their right to drop out at any time. The students signed the consent form and took a copy home for their parents to sign. In this study, all of the student’s names have been changed to pseudonyms and I have removed their names from their artifacts. I explained this to both students and parents.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, I then organized my data. The first step in this process was to type up all of my field notes and student questionnaires. Next, I made several copies of each of the students’ questionnaires. Third, I collected student projects that were to be further analyzed. Last, I uploaded the files of student presentations onto my computer. Once I had all of my data organized, I then began reading through my data and making meaning out of it by coding my data. My critical college also read through my data and coded it. I then compared my codes with my critical colleague’s codes.

After I had read through my data several times, I began to group similar codes together. I looked for patterns that emerged and organized them into larger groups. For example, after looking at the codes, I found different skills. Some of these skills included working together and time on task. I grouped those items together into the larger theme of organizational skills. After organizing all of the codes three themes emerged. The three themes that emerged were student autonomy, literacy skills, and organizational skills.

Findings and Discussion
After reviewing and analyzing my data collected, three major themes emerged. These three themes were the following: student autonomy, literacy skills, and organizational skills.

**Student Autonomy**

The first theme that surfaced from my data was student autonomy or student independence. Through PBL, the students were able to have greater control over what they were learning therefore increasing their motivation, choices, and creativity.

One aspect of student autonomy that came out of the data multiple times was student motivation. When observing in the classroom, it was evident that students were very motivated to create their own projects and then teach their classmates about what they had learned. On the first day of observations when the project was assigned, I observed how excited students were to get started on working on their projects. After directions were given, students quickly began to move to find their partners and get down to work. In order to choose what president each group would be researching, student chose their president out of a hat. As a result, the excitement in the room increased as each student was eager to see who they would get. The noise level in the room was quite loud. Students began throwing out ideas about what project they ultimately wanted to create and what would make their project exciting for others to view. Students also immediately asked for the materials they would use to begin researching their president. Students were clearly motivated to start working.

Another example of student autonomy that came out of the data was student choice. On a questionnaire given to the four students about their experience working on this project, their ability to make their own choices came up frequently. When asked what they liked about their
projects three out of the four students questioned responded with something relating to student choice.

Nicole responded with, “I liked how we were able to choose people we were going to work with and be able to choose what type of project to make” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010).

Emily responded to the same question with “I like the different ways that everyone presented the information. While it was also fun to create and choose their projects” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010).

Patrick responded to the question with “I liked that I had the opportunity to choose my own partner. I also like the choices I was given” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010).

Being able to make their own choices about their projects was very important to students. The ability to make their own decisions increased their motivation on this project. This finding is consistent with the findings of Jones (2003), who also found that because of student choice the motivation of the students in his study greatly increased. Students in his study put forth more effort into what they were learning because they were given choices and therefore were more motivated.

A third aspect of student autonomy that emerged from the data is the aspect of creativity. Because the students could choose which project to present their data through, they were able to use their own creativity therefore taking more ownership over what they were learning. Through observations, I could see the students really stretching themselves and working towards presenting their information in a creative way. No two projects were exactly alike. Students that created PowerPoint presentations added video clips, review games, and other visuals to enhance
their presentations. Other groups created storybooks, skits, interviews, raps, songs, and puppet shows. Even though some groups were working on the same presidents they were able to use their own creativity to make their projects their own. Kasey’s group which created a puppet show used different materials such as felt, foam, and paper bags to create their puppets and represent their key aspects. Emily’s group made an interview to represent Jimmy Carter’s presidency. Emily played the role of Jimmy Carter while her partner was the interviewer. The girls projected an image of the Whitehouse to serve as the backdrop for their interview. The students in my class were able to choose a project that best suited their own learning styles and therefore achieved greater levels of success than if they had been given a traditional style of assessment. This finding is consistent with the findings of Gainer (2008) who also found that students achieved more when they could express their learning in ways that suited them best. The presentations that students created were very diverse therefore demonstrating that students incorporated their own choices and creativity into their work.

Literacy skills

Another important theme that came out of the data collected was the use of different literacy skills by the students to complete their projects. Students needed to call upon many aspects of literacy in order to be successful in this project. One key literacy component that stood out was comprehension. Students wrote on their questionnaires that they learned and could understand their topics and others through the different projects. On her questionnaire, Emily stated that “I learned all about my president’s presidency and the project as a whole” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010). Kasey commented that “I learned a lot about Carter’s presidency and learning about the other presidents around that time” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010). Patrick also focused on comprehension and stated that “I learned why Nixon resigned
because I didn’t really know why previously” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010). Each of these students learned the desired content through PBL. Additionally on her questionnaire, Nicole commented that she liked the project because, “I would learn a lot about my topic and learn about others as well. I remember mine well after” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010). They key piece to her response is that Nicole will remember what she learned far after the end of the presentations and unit test. This confirms Friedman and Heafner’s (2008) research in which they found that PBL led to greater long term retention of content. It is also important to note that Nicole also wrote on her questionnaire that “I learned a lot from well made projects but some I didn’t learn from because they were not clear” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010). Nicole is bringing up the issue of gaps in learning. This potential problem was also raised by Jones (2003) who found that students learn a lot about their topic, but do not learn as much about the other topics that they did not research themselves.

Another example of student comprehension can be seen through the completed projects of the students. Through analyzing their completed work I can see the amount of content that was learned and put into their work. In this excerpt from Patrick’s Nixon rap it is evident that content was learned:

   Watergate scandal was hard to handle
   Nixon taped his meetings
   Congress hated the greeting
   Congress got the tapes
   At a court case
   About to be impeached
   Nixon retreats
   And resigns from his climb
And loses pride (student rap, June 10, 2010).

In this particular excerpt, Patrick touches upon key points in Nixon’s administration including the Watergate scandal, Nixon’s fears of impeachment, and his resignation. Also while observing Patrick in class, he was always singing his rap to himself, therefore further increasing his retention of the content.

As part of the literacy skill of comprehension, the skill of finding main ideas was also seen through the data collected. As part of the assignment, students needed to be focused and find the main points of their president’s administration. Students needed to read the information given and pull out the main ideas. In her questionnaire, Emily wrote that finding the main ideas was more challenging for her. She wrote “one challenge was putting the information in the project in a way to make it smooth and original and not tell people things that are not on topic” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010). In order to correct this problem, Emily decided to modify and change her original plan. When viewing the students’ presentations, it is evident that they were able to pull out the main ideas of their topic regardless of the project created.

Additionally, another literacy skill that can be seen in the data collected is the skill of discussion. Bell (2010) found that students learned how to have meaningful discussions and actively listen to others while engaged in PBL. While observing, I too saw students frequently engaging in thought provoking discussions about their content. Students actively listened to their partners and were responding to them, resulting in a deeper understanding of the content. On his questionnaire, Kasey wrote that one of his preferred learning methods was through discussion. He said that he liked to debate and talk about the information with others who were learning about the same topics. The projects that students were engaged in allowed them to do just that. I
observed students talking about the content, which information was essential to know, and which information was not needed for their particular project. Through these discussion, students gained a deeper understanding of the content that they were learning while also gaining valuable skills in how to have discussions with others.

Organizational skills

Another important theme that emerged from this data was organizational skills. Students needed to apply a variety of organizational skills in order for them to be successful. These skills include working together, problem solving, and spending time on task.

Working together is a central aspect to PBL and was essential for students to do well on this assignment. While observing the students in the classroom, it was evident that they were working together. Students would ask each other questions to clarify something or if they needed help rather than come as me, the teacher. The students also worked very closely together to determine what type of project they wanted to create. I observed students planning out the project together and assigning tasks to each partner. The groups worked well together with little to no assistance from me. The ability to work together was also something that motivated the students. When asked on their questionnaires what they liked about the project, all four of the students responded with the fact that they enjoyed working with a partner. For example, on his questionnaire, Kasey stated that “I enjoyed working with my friends and just enjoyed the whole experience” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010). Similarly, Gultekin, (2005) also found that students were more motivated to complete a task when they were allowed to work collaboratively.
Another aspect centered on the theme of organization is time spent on task. In order for the groups to be successful, they needed to set a plan and work together to complete the project in the time allotted. While observing, I saw students creating a plan and working very hard to meet the goals they had set forth. On his questionnaire, Kasey mentioned that a challenge that he and his partner faced was time. His group decided to create a puppet show and made different puppets to represent the key aspects of Jimmy Carter’s presidency. His group searched the internet for pictures and also used felt and foam to hand make their puppets. The whole process was rather elaborate. On his questionnaire, he wrote: “we were pressed for time because we kept playing around with the puppets” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010). Because they wanted to make the puppets the best they could and use accurate information to make sure the puppets were accurate, their project took more time. When asked how his group worked through the challenges, Kasey responded with, “we buckled down and were able to finish on the last day” (student questionnaire, June 16, 2010). One fear that teachers have is that students will not spend much time on task because they are goofing off and not really focusing on the task at hand (Jones, 2003). In contrast, as seen in Kasey’s group, they were so motivated and excited about their puppets that they worked extra hard to make sure that they puppets were done well and on time. Time on task was something that really was not an issue for these groups. The students were so motivated that they wanted to do the project and all groups were able to finish on time.

Another aspect of organization seen in the data is problem solving. Problem solving is a skill that students develop through PBL (Rudolf & Wurdinger 2009). While observing, I could see students experiencing various challenges throughout the project. When researching, a couple of groups were unsure of the information that they were gathering. Instead of giving up, the students asked to use the internet to find more information about their president to further
understand what they were learning. Students also called upon each other for help. When there was a content question, I observed the students talking it out and reading through the information together to make sure that both partners understood what they needed to know. I also observed students helping each other when it came to creating the project. Some students had more experience with technology than their partner and were able to help guide their partner through the issues that they were having. In Kasey’s group, the students used trial and error to come up with the best design for the puppets. Some puppets they decided to make out of paper bags. When deciding how they would represent the Soviet Union as a puppet, the groups had a discussion and decided to create the Soviet flag out of foam and then attach the flag to a popsicle stick. The students learned how to communicate and work together to be able to problem solve and be successful.

Implications

Through this study, I learned that several factors influence student motivation to read content area texts. I have also found that PBL helps to teach students not only the content but valuable literacy and organizational skills. The results of this study will be used to enhance my daily practice.

As a secondary social studies teacher, I have struggled with how to get students to read content area texts. Based on the research and findings of this study, I saw a direct correlation between students’ motivation and their willingness to read content area texts. Based on the findings of my study, it is clear that students were highly engaged and motivated to work on the assigned project. Since the students were motivated, they read the texts that were given to them
and even found more texts to read to give them more information on their topic. If the students were not so motivated, they would not have been as motivated to read the text given to them.

Another factor that increased student motivation was student choice (Jones, 2003). In my study, students were given multiple opportunities to make their own decisions, therefore giving them more ownership over their own learning. Students chose who they would work with, which president they would research, what project they were going to create, and how they were going to create it. Giving students this freedom to make their own choices greatly increased their motivation. Students are more motivated to learn because they are doing the learning instead of being fed by the teacher and are able to make their own decisions (Bezon et al., 2007). As a teacher, it is important to recognize this fact and allow students to make the own choices whenever possible. This element is something that I will strive to incorporate more of in my daily practice.

Additionally, the element of creative freedom that was given to the students helped to increase their motivation. Student learning was assessed by what the students chose to create instead of a more traditional style pen and paper test. By giving students an alternative way to demonstrate their learning, students were much more motivated and produced creative and detailed projects. Kasey’s group created a puppet show. A puppet show was not even one of the original choices available to students; they came up with it on their own. As a teacher, it is important for me to recognize that there are different types of learners in my classroom. Not all students learn in the same way and one teaching method will not reach all of them. No two projects that were created were alike. My students who are not motivated to read were more motivated because of project based learning because they knew that they were going to be able to do something creative with the information they were reading. Bruce (2009) also found that
PBL motivated the students in his study to read because they were engaging in creating their own multimedia project to demonstrate their understanding of the text. By using PBL teachers are able to differentiate and motivate students who otherwise might not be as motivated to read.

Also PBL helped to increase student comprehension. Students read content text and to demonstrate their learning and comprehension created original projects. By looking at the completed projects, it is evident that students’ learning and comprehension occurred. Students retained their content because they took more ownership over it. They completed the reading then designed and created the project; through this process greater learning occurred. For example, Patrick was singing his Nixon rap long after his presentation. This finding is consistent with the findings of Heafner’s (2008) who found that PBL led to students having a greater retention of content later on in the school year. Students were able to remember their projects and what they created to help them remember the content.

Furthermore, through project based learning my students gained valuable skills in organization and working together. In this project, students were responsible for the design and creation of their project. This makes a lot of teachers nervous to put this control in the hands of their students. However, when given this opportunity, students did very well. They worked together and helped each other when challenges occurred. As a result, students not only gained content knowledge, but they also gained valuable skills in working with others. These skills are something that students are going to need to be successful in their everyday lives. De La Paz and Hernandez- Ramos (2009) also found that students’ skills in collaboration improved because of PBL. Students were then able to apply the skills that they gained to future projects (2009). Giving students more opportunity to work collaboratively on projects like this will only help to enhance and improve their skills in organization and collaboration. Through this study, it is
evident that students not only read texts and learned content, they also designed projects and worked with others. As a teacher, all of these things are important to me. By engaging students in PBL, I can help to promote these understandings and skills in my students.

**Conclusions**

Through PBL teachers can motivate students to read content area texts. PBL is a student driven method of instruction that allows students to demonstrate their learning through creating their own projects (Bell, 2010). Because of PBL, students are more motivated because they have a voice and are able to make their own decisions and choices. As a result of PBL, students have more ownership over their learning and therefore a deeper understanding of what they have read (Bezon et al., 2007). One of the limitations of this study is the amount of time that this study was conducted in. Through further research on this topic, I would like to examine other ways in which teachers could motivate students to read as well as the impacts of PBL on long term comprehension. PBL is one method that teachers can use to engage students. Through this study, the data shows that students enjoyed PBL and had success with it. It is important for teachers to be able to give up some of the control in their classrooms and allow students to be more involved in their own learning. The results of doing so will allow students to be more motivated and engaged in what they are learning.
References


Appendix A

Name: ___________________________

Student Questionnaire

1. What did you like about your Chapter 30 project?
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________

2. What did you learn from completing this project?
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________

3. What challenges did you encounter when completing your project?
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________

4. How did you work through these challenges?
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
Of the 5 teaching methods below, which one do you enjoy the most? 5 being enjoy it a lot, 1 being do not enjoy it

5. Discussion  
   1 2 3 4 5

6. Lecture  
   1 2 3 4 5

7. Working in small groups  
   1 2 3 4 5

8. Working independently  
   1 2 3 4 5

9. Creating projects  
   1 2 3 4 5

10. Which method did you enjoy the most? _______________________________________

   a. Why?

   _______________________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________________

Of the 5 teaching methods below, which one helps you learn best? 5 being helps me learn the most, 1 does not help me learn

11. Discussion  
    1 2 3 4 5
12. Lecture  
13. Working in small groups  
14. Working independently  
15. Creating projects  
16. Which method helps you learn best? _________________________________
   
   a. Why?
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________