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Creative Writing in the Social Studies Classroom: Improving Student Achievement

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to determine whether or not utilizing creative writing prompts within the social studies classroom helped improve student achievement in the social studies content area. Quantitative data was collected through exit tickets that students completed in a fifth-grade social studies classroom. Analysis of the data did not conclusively suggest that the creative writing intervention had a significant impact, either positive or negative, on student achievement. Throughout the course of this study, additional questions arose that could be the basis for further research in the future.

Keywords: creative writing, student achievement, social studies

Creative Writing in the Social Studies Classroom: Improving Student Achievement

Elementary social studies teachers are facing an unprecedented number of challenges within the classroom, and the stakes for student mastery of content have never been higher. As standardized test scores carry more and more weight across the nation, teachers are forced to prioritize math and literacy instruction. This often results in less time for social studies instruction altogether, although the expectations for social studies teachers are incredibly high. While balancing the rigor of arguably more important content areas, teachers are expected to teach their students both history and how to study history, the geography of our world and how to be a geographer, the structure of our government and how to engage with it as a responsible citizen. These demands can often feel overwhelming, for both teachers and their students (Valbuena, 2017).

In fifth grade, in particular, students begin to study American history in depth for the first time. While they have had an introduction to the social studies from kindergarten, much of their social studies class work up through the middle elementary years has been a big picture overview. However, once students reach the upper elementary grades, they are expected to memorize dates, names, and information about historical events that took place centuries before they were born. Along with all of that, students are also expected to develop the skills necessary to study history. Students must learn to discern which sources provide accurate historical information, analyze the causes and effects of historical events, study the differing points of view from which a variety of historical figures came, and understand the historical context in which these people lived and these events took place.

This is a daunting amount of instruction for fifth-grade social studies teachers to handle. With this in mind, the researcher sought to examine an instructional method that might help

teachers conquer several of these objectives while also strengthening students' literacy skills: creative writing. Much research has been done regarding the effectiveness of creative writing on strengthening students' literacy skills. However, little research has been done on the effects of creative writing in the social studies content area and its effects on strengthening students' content area skills. The researcher sought to examine these effects in order to determine whether or not utilizing creative writing prompts within the social studies classroom helped improve student achievement in the social studies content area.

Creative writing can serve a multitude of purposes in the upper elementary classroom. Teachers can create independent writing prompts that are differentiated to best challenge each student in the classroom, which can help strengthen students' literacy skills. In 1992, Davis, Rooze, and Tallent Runnels found that by writing in a social studies journal, fourth-grade students' writing fluency and learning retention improved (Davis, Rooze, & Tallent Runnels, 1992). Creative writing also provides an opportunity for students to enter a historical world in a uniquely profound way. By figuratively walking a mile in a historical figure's shoes, or at least in a historical context, students' eyes are opened to details they may have otherwise missed. The people, places, and events of the past come to life in a new way as students imagine what it would be like to actually encounter them personally. By engaging students' imaginations, the creative writing process is practiced and historical contexts can become vivid learning experiences.

Review of the Literature

Creative writing is an instructional method that has been used for decades. While the writing prompts and tools used for writing have evolved over time, there is no doubt that teachers have long valued and prioritized the writing process in upper elementary classrooms.

Writing has been an integral part of our nation's schools for decades, and our students develop writing skills in language arts and literacy classes from the time they are able to hold a pencil. In recent decades, teachers have begun to more intentionally integrate writing across other content areas as well, in an attempt to keep up with rigorous standards and the pressures that accompany them. Wilcox, Jeffery, and Gardner-Bixler (2016) found that "teachers described feeling pressure to push students to produce writing that would meet the criteria for a high score on a rubric" (p. 916). However, while social studies teachers have been thus integrating more writing in their instruction, little research has been done to determine the effect this is having on students' mastery of social studies objectives.

Social Studies Content Area Objectives

Across grade levels, students are expected to learn an exceptional amount of factual information in the social studies classroom. On summative assessments, students must recall the sequence of historical events, and as they reach the upper elementary grades, even the dates of many of these historical events. They must also recall the names of historical figures and the roles they played in the history of our world. In order to best understand these events and historical figures, students are also expected to learn the geographic location of many of these events and people, as well as the names of these locations in the present day. While the Common Core State Standards include a daunting amount of essential information for teachers to cover, many teachers also feel the need to teach students other content area concepts that are not necessarily emphasized in the standards or on summative assessments. For example, many social studies teachers feel it is their responsibility to teach their students what it means to be a responsible citizen, even above and beyond the way this concept is expressed in state and national standards. According to Hutton and Hembacher (2017), "the adoption of the CCSS

raised hopes among social science advocates that a more well-rounded elementary curriculum would emerge, but history-social science continues to take a back seat to numerous competing curricular and instructional priorities in public schools” (p. 44). In this day and age, many would describe our government as politicized and divisive, and many teachers feel it is their responsibility to instill empathy and the ability to consider others’ perspectives in their students as well. Other teachers feel that the social studies classroom provides a unique setting to teach their students important concepts related to social justice, and to encourage their students to view history and our current world issues through the lens of social justice. However, the social studies content area objectives that teachers are required to cover may demand too much time for these additional objectives to be covered as well.

Social studies content area objectives defined. While social studies content area objectives may vary slightly by state, there are consistent learning objectives across the nation. Hutton and Hembacher (2017) found that history and social studies teachers are in need of curricula that prepare students not only for their academic lives, but also for their future lives as American citizens. The current framework established in their state of California, and similar to the requirements of social studies standards across the nation, emphasizes “a coherent course of study to teach content, develop inquiry-based critical thinking skills, improve reading comprehension and expository writing ability, and promote an engaged and knowledgeable citizenry in history and the related social sciences” (Hutton & Hembacher, 2017, p. 44). While these objectives correlate well with the language arts objectives that many states seek to teach, the social studies objectives imply that students use those language skills in a new context, in order to interpret and understand history and the social sciences well. According to Reinhard (2014), the Common Core State Standards place a strong emphasis on academic rigor and can

present an extra challenge for social studies teachers, who seek to integrate social justice concepts into their instruction along with the required standards. These academic demands and the push for rigor have only increased in recent years, and this places a strain on many educators.

Methods used to master these objectives in the past. In the past, teachers have utilized a variety of instructional methods in order to best reach all of these social studies content area objectives. Many adults today may remember reading a textbook, or even just listening to a teacher read a textbook, in social studies class. While this is certainly an efficient way to expose students to many historical events, people, and places in a short amount of time, it is hardly the most exciting or engaging for many students. With the advent of the digital age, and the social media age in recent years, teachers have increasingly attempted to find more creative ways of engaging their students in the social studies classroom. Kaf and Yilmaz (2017), for example, investigated the effect of creative drama in a fourth-grade social studies classroom, and they found that this method “has a significant effect on social studies achievement and students’ attitudes toward social studies but not a significant effect on retention of social studies knowledge” (p. 289). While the benefits of such strategies could encourage teachers to utilize them, despite their ineffectiveness on students’ mastery of social studies content, many teachers feel the need to develop strategies that both engage and develop these content area skills in students.

Similarly, Wright-Maley (2016) conducted a study of enactivist approaches to learning in a middle school social studies setting, and he specifically researched the positive and negative effects of play-based learning on student achievement. Wright-Maley (2016) spent time investigating the classroom of two veteran middle school teachers, who use play-based simulations of historical contexts as a way to facilitate their students’ learning. He conducted a

series of interviews with the teachers in order to determine their rationale for utilizing such instructional strategies as well as their effectiveness. He found that there were many benefits to this engaging instructional method, including “perceived positive changes in academic performance, affective dispositions, and behavior” (Wright-Maley, 2016, p. 7). However, the research also revealed some challenges that arose by using this approach in the classroom, such as the fact that it “can be resource intensive, require support from peers and administrators and patience on the part of the teacher. In addition, teachers may have to withstand the criticisms of their peers” (Wright-Maley, 2016, p. 7). While these approaches can be wonderful ways to engage students in the social studies content, the drawbacks of each must be considered and carefully weighed by the teacher.

Social Studies Critical Thinking Skills Objectives

Along with teaching students the factual information required by social studies standards, teachers must also find ways of teaching students a variety of critical thinking skills specific to the content area. Students must learn to discern which sources provide accurate historical information, analyze the causes and effects of historical events, interpret the differing points of view from which a variety of historical figures came, and understand the historical context in which these people lived and these events took place. While the factual information they learn is necessary for success on summative assessments, these critical thinking skills are equally essential for students. Valbuena (2017) contends:

A crowded elementary curriculum challenges teachers to cover a large amount of standards in a given time span. However, if we are truly committed to improving the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions of our citizenry, we must give the social sciences and civic education a high priority, full attention, and ample resources. (p. 51)

These critical thinking skills help develop our students' identities as young historians, and they can also shape their perspectives on the world. Both of those components will change the way students approach their high school and college education, and they will also change the way they approach their role as national and global citizens.

Social studies critical thinking skills objectives defined. Unfortunately, developing these critical thinking skills requires much higher order thinking, and it also requires a significant amount of instructional time. Valbuena (2017) argues that while social studies critical thinking skills objectives can be difficult to fit into educators' schedules, they are both necessary and essential for developing responsible citizens. She contends that "we know students need the participation skills necessary for monitoring and influencing civic life: the abilities to think critically, work with others and express ideas. It is indeed paradoxical that at the same time we acknowledge the primacy of civic education, we often accord the subject less and less attention in elementary schools, pushing it to the margin or, literally, the last 15 minutes of the day, as math, science and reading get the prime time learning hours" (Valbuena, 2017, p. 51). Many teachers feel this tension, as they seek to balance the rigorous demands of this complex content area with the other demands of a typical school day.

Other researchers have encountered this same paradox in other contexts. Fry and O'Brien (2017), for example, sought to examine these critical thinking skills in the contexts of citizenship and social justice. The results of their study led them to hypothesize that there is a self-perpetuating cycle within our education system that prevents our students from developing a deep understanding and passion for social justice. In other words, even though we may be emphasizing the skills students need in order to interpret historical and current world events in the social studies classroom, this is not having a lasting effect on the way they view the world

outside of the classroom. Babini (2013) also found that while social studies critical thinking skills are essential for helping our students grow into responsible citizens, the No Child Left Behind Act is causing many teachers to cut down the time they spend on social studies each day. Her research showed that “through the use of integrating social studies into the literacy block, social studies topics were often read about, but the tasks and activities students were engaged in were to improve literacy skills, not teach social studies content or skills” (Babini, 2013, p. 2-3). Ultimately, in order to help students master the social studies content area objectives and develop social studies critical thinking skills, students need to do more than just read about historical topics. They need to be engaged in opportunities to practice being a historian – an opportunity that cannot be duplicated by reading an article in a language arts class. While teachers have sought to teach these critical thinking skills to their students for decades, the methods that have been used in past years may not be realistic for today’s teachers to implement in the course of their overwhelmingly busy schedules.

Methods used to master these objectives in the past. In the past, teachers have found a variety of creative ways to help their elementary age students understand some of the more complex aspects of social studies. Brugar (2018), for example, researched the effectiveness of visual aids in the social studies classroom. She contends that “various visual materials (e.g., diagrams, maps, paintings, photographs, timelines) provide information as well as outlets for students to communicate their understandings” (Brugar, 2018, p. 1). She conducted research among pre-service teachers over the course of one semester, before their student teaching, and investigated the extent to which these teachers incorporated visual aids in their lesson plans. She states that “instructional approaches tend to be more static than dynamic due to teachers' limited experiences and content knowledge” (Brugar, 2018, p. 1), but she also advocated for visuals and

graphics as a way to help teachers make social studies critical thinking skills more accessible to young students. It is important to note that even within an elementary school setting, there is a wide range of student ability and cognitive development. Teachers must know and understand the developmental stage that their students are in, so that they can plan developmentally appropriate activities that help them to master even challenging critical thinking skills.

Others have attempted to integrate both reading and writing into the social studies classroom as a way to help students develop these critical thinking skills. Strachan (2016) conducted a research study within elementary social studies classrooms and found that different schools integrated literacy activities in a wide variety of ways. Her results showed that “teachers used different integration practices depending on which social studies curriculum materials they reported using, particularly regarding the types of texts read and written and the amount of time spent writing” (Strachan, 2016, p. 69). She found that within second-grade classrooms, some students spent very little time writing, while others spent marginally more. However, she noted that there was hardly any time for extended writing in the classrooms in which she observed, and that for much of the time when students were actively involved in writing, they were filling out worksheets. She found it interesting that while there are Common Core standards that emphasize other types of writing that could be easily incorporated into the social studies classroom, such as persuasive or opinion writing, these types of writing were not often utilized. She considered this to be a missed opportunity for teachers, as this would be one of many potential benefits of creative writing in the social studies classroom.

Benefits of Creative Writing in Social Studies

If asked about it directly, most teachers would most likely agree that creative writing is beneficial for students. It makes sense that asking students to reflect on what they are learning

and to express their own ideas through writing would help them to develop and articulate their own ideas clearly. Creative writing, surely, is a very efficient way to help students master literacy objectives, as teachers often employ this instructional strategy in language arts classes. However, many teachers may wonder whether creative writing in other subject areas, such as social studies, can also help students master those content area objectives. As noted, teachers today are under much pressure to fit social studies into their schedules at all, and using social studies time to focus on writing might seem to be counterproductive. Research shows, however, that while creative writing does help students to master literacy objectives, it could also help students master social studies content area and critical thinking skills objectives as well.

Benefits for mastering literacy objectives. While creative writing is not as emphasized in the Common Core State Standards as other types of writing, it is an essential genre for young writers to practice. In researching this, Wilcox, Jeffery, and Gardner-Bixler (2016) found that “teachers described feeling pressure to push students to produce writing that would meet the criteria for a high score on a rubric while sacrificing more joyful writing experiences including those that involved imaginative and narrative writing” (p. 916). While learning to write other types of writing is, of course, important, many teachers worry that by leaving out the creative writing we are keeping our students from learning to express their own imaginative creativity in writing, a skill they will need for academic success in the future. Additionally, intentionally fostering opportunities for students to use their imaginations in the classroom could engage students in a way that other genres of writing simply cannot.

Others have found that the process of learning creative writing can help students strengthen their writing skills across other literacy contexts as well. De Smedt and Van Keer (2018) found that many elementary students struggle “when asked to perform higher-order skills,

such as planning (i.e., producing and organizing ideas), generating texts (i.e., translating ideas into words and sentences), and revising texts (i.e., process of rewriting texts to improve the overall text quality)” (p. 326). Each of these higher-order thinking skills, while complex and challenging to teach, is developed and strengthened through creative writing practice. By providing more opportunities for students to practice creative writing, they can practice brainstorming and organizing their own creative ideas in a structured way. Creative writing also provides opportunities for students to translate their ideas into well-written words and sentences, a skill that only improves in depth with more practice. These skills are necessary for all types of writing, and creative writing can be an engaging way for students to develop these skills. The practice of editing and revising one’s own writing can also be developed through the creative writing process, further showing the positive effects of creative writing on student mastery of literacy objectives.

Benefits for mastering social studies content area objectives. There is very little research, however, regarding the effects of creative writing on students’ mastery of social studies content area objectives. In 1992, Davis, Rooze, and Tallent Runnels conducted a study of fourth-grade students in a social studies classroom. These students engaged in a variety of journal writing activities twice a week for nine weeks. Sometimes students would write a summary of new information they had learned, and other times they would write letters to friends or pen pals reflecting on a social studies concept. The research showed that “journal writing facilitates writing fluency and learning retention in fourth grade social studies. We will need to conduct further studies to explore the effects of journal writing across the curriculum” (Davis et al., 1992, p. 397). They went on to explain that more research is needed in order to determine the effect that creative writing would have on students’ writing, other than just improving their fluency, as

well as the effect that it could have on students' attitudes. While it is encouraging to note that this journal writing did help students to strengthen their fluency skills and to remember social studies information longer than their peers, the type of writing that students completed in their journals varied greatly. More research is needed to determine the effectiveness of imaginative creative writing for helping today's students master today's social studies content area objectives.

Benefits for mastering social studies critical thinking skills objectives. Some research has been done regarding the effectiveness of writing in helping students to master social studies critical thinking skills objectives, but little has been done specifically regarding the effectiveness of creative writing. Graham, Kerkhoff, and Spires (2016), for example, found that many writing strategies in social studies middle school classrooms focus on supporting arguments with evidence and analyzing sources. One of the teachers involved in this study, however, shared the importance of coming up with creative projects to help keep his students engaged in the social studies content they were learning. He pointed out that students enjoyed creating informational flyers, propaganda posters from World War II, Public Service Announcements, and even soldiers' journals from World War I. These projects were designed to help students imagine what life was like during each historical time period, and they were required to use social studies critical thinking skills in order to accomplish each task successfully. According to the teacher, however, "writing that was not based around historical facts and did not utilize quotes to back up the argument was considered invalid in his classroom" (Graham et al., 2016, p. 63). This shows that even though students were engaged in creative projects, their writing process was very structured, and the students' writing was held to a high standard. More research is needed in

order to determine the effectiveness of these types of creative projects in helping students to master social studies critical thinking skills objectives.

Potential Negative Effects of Creative Writing in Social Studies

While creative writing may seem to have a positive effect on students' literacy and social studies content area and critical thinking skills development, there are some potential negative effects to consider as well. As already noted, social studies teachers are under a lot of pressure to teach state and national standards within a short amount of time. Hutton and Hembacher (2017) find that "history-social science continues to take a back seat to numerous competing curricular and instructional priorities in public schools" (p. 44). As a result, teachers need to be sure that any instructional methods they utilize within the classroom are proven to help students master both content area and critical thinking skills objectives. Also, as already mentioned, many teachers feel that the social studies standards do not fully encompass all of the objectives they hope to reach with their students. For example, teachers feel the need to prepare their students to be informed, responsible citizens on a national and global scale, and simply teaching to the standards may not be sufficient to accomplish this goal. Other teachers have expressed that the social studies classroom should be the context in which students learn about social justice and its role not only in the formation of our national and global history, but also in current world events. As teachers seek to balance all that they hope to accomplish with all of the standards that they need to accomplish, making time for creative writing may be a challenge. Teachers may worry that this time would be better spent on other social studies skill-based activities, and more research is needed to determine whether or not creative writing is as effective as some of those other activities in regards to student social studies achievement. According to Davis, Rooze, and Tallent Runnels (1992), "journal writing facilitates writing fluency and learning retention in

fourth grade social studies. We will need to conduct further studies to explore the effects of journal writing across the curriculum” (p. 397). Additionally, writing activities can provoke negative reactions from students, particularly students who do not enjoy writing. As a result, creative writing in the social studies classroom could have a negative effect on students’ attitudes toward social studies in general.

Loss of instructional time for other social studies skill-based activities. As previously mentioned, social studies teachers are required to cover a seemingly impossible amount of material into a very short amount of time with their students. As a result, any strategies implemented in the classroom must be proven to be the very best practice, helping students to master both content area objectives and critical thinking skill objectives simultaneously. According to Croddy (2017), “since the inception of public education, the responsibility of assuring an educated populace has fallen largely to teachers. Today, their challenge is greater than ever” (p. 19). He explains that as tensions boil between our government and our national media, social studies teachers feel a rising pressure to develop strong critical thinking skills in their students that will enable them to make informed, wise decisions on their own. He contends that there are many components of instruction that should be included in any effective strategy that could meet these objectives. Specifically, he believes that such instructional strategies should include classroom instruction “government, history, law and democracy” as well as a discussion of “current and controversial issues, [...] service-learning linked to formal curriculum and classroom instruction,” and “student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures” (Croddy, 2017, p. 19). He adds that these instructional strategies “place the student in an active learner role, and by so doing the motivate and engage” (Croddy, 2017, p. 19). This gives students an opportunity to really feel what it is like to be an active citizen of our nation.

Similarly, creative writing could engage students by placing them in the role of an active learner, imagining what it would be like to live in a historical context quite different than their own.

Student attitude. However, in order to effectively give students that experience, it could be argued that students need to have a positive attitude toward the social studies content area, towards writing, towards the social studies classroom, and even toward the social studies teacher. A negative perspective on any of these components could inhibit students from truly opening their imaginations to the historical contexts they're expected to live into, thus preventing them from truly developing an understanding of the concepts, people, and places about which they are writing. According to Marrs, Zumbrunn, McBride, and Stringer, (2016) "in the elementary classroom, writing can be particularly challenging for children who are just beginning to hone their writing skills and their ability to plan their writing" (p. 16). These authors went on to explain that while a majority of elementary students in their research study enjoyed receiving feedback on their writing, because they expected positive comments from their teacher, there were a significant number of students that did not enjoy this part of the writing process because they expected to hear negative feedback from their teacher. Some students even feared embarrassment or cruel words from their teachers. As a result, many of these young students had already developed fears and anxieties about writing and believed that they were bad writers. While these students may represent the minority in many classrooms, it is important to keep in mind that writing can invoke strong negative feelings in these students, even in other subject areas such as social studies. In order to implement creative writing in a way that could potentially improve student achievement in the social studies classroom, the teacher must first create an environment in which all students feel respected, capable, and confident. This will

eliminate the negative attitudes and feelings that could prevent this strategy from being effective for many students.

Methods

Participants

The research was conducted at a private Christian school in suburban West Michigan. There are 57 fifth grade students that participated in this research study, in three class sections of 19 students each. Of these students, 24 are boys and 33 are girls. Almost all of these students are white, although one identifies as Asian/White. Seven students have an Individualized Education Program, and receive accommodations, modifications, or extra support through the school's Learning Support Services. Nine students participate in the school's Academically Talented (A.T.) program. Of these nine students, four go to A.T. for Math, four go to A.T. for Literacy, and one student goes to A.T. for both Math and Literacy. The fifth grade is similar in structure to the sixth through eighth grades. As a result, the fifth-grade students rotate through all three fifth grade classrooms each week with their homeroom. One teacher teaches all of the literacy, and another teaches all of the math. The researcher teaches all of the science and social studies. Each teacher also teaches spelling and Bible to their own homeroom class.

Data Collection

The researcher sought to examine the effect of creative writing in helping improve student achievement in the social studies content area. Action research was conducted in her classroom over the course of three months. The researcher taught three class sections of fifth grade social studies, and each class completed two curricular units over the course of the research study. The first curricular unit focused on the Age of Exploration, while the second unit focused on Early English Settlements. Throughout each unit, the researcher taught the same

lessons to each class section, and the students engaged in a variety of educational activities. These included such activities as reading from a textbook, engaging in class discussion, listening to a teacher read from children's books related to the content, taking notes from a short lecture, and filling out graphic organizers related to the content matter.

At the conclusion of each unit, Class Section One completed a creative writing activity in class, while the other two class sections did not. These writing prompts were designed to help the students imagine that they were alive during the historical time period of each unit. In order to complete each creative writing activity, students needed to take on the perspective of someone who lived during the time period. They were required to include description and details that aligned with the content that had been taught in previous lessons. In the first unit, over the Age of Exploration, Class Section One was divided in half. The first group was asked to imagine that they were explorers, and that they were writing an entry in their Explorer Log, describing their adventures in the New World. The second group was asked to imagine that they were Native Americans who had recently encountered the European explorers on their native land. Both groups described their observations of the other and included a story about an interaction they'd had with the other group. After twenty minutes, and a break for lunch recess, the groups were switched. The researcher asked the students to imagine that they were stepping out of their previous shoes and stepping into some new ones, imagining the same scenario from the opposite point of view. Throughout both writing activities, students were encouraged to move around the classroom in order to find a comfortable writing spot that would help spark their imaginations.

In the second unit, over early English settlements in America, the students in Class Section One were asked to imagine that they were settlers in the Jamestown colony. They wrote an entry in their settler's journals, telling about their experience. They described a day in their

life as a Jamestown settler, and they described their thoughts and feelings as they did so. Their writing included both push factors and pull factors, as students described some of the reasons they chose to leave England and move to America. Students also described some of the problems they faced when they first established the Jamestown settlement, as well as some of the reasons that life was beginning to improve for the settlers over time. In completing these creative writing prompts, students were encouraged to use their imaginations to help them connect with the content they had studied.

On the days that these creative writing prompts were given to Class Section One, the other two class sections (referred to as Class Sections Two and Three) did not participate in the creative writing activity. These class sections engaged in a lesson that involved other social studies skill activities instead. In some cases, Class Section Two or Class Section Three simply completed a lesson that the other sections had previously completed, as snow days had interfered with the school schedule. In other cases, Class Sections Two and Three completed one social studies lesson over the course of two days, as the teacher added extra activities to fill the time. These activities included additional time for class discussion, as well as bell ringer activities that reviewed the previous lesson's content. At the completion of each lesson on the day that Class Section One participated in the creative writing activity, the researcher gave each of the three class sections an exit ticket, which assessed each student's mastery of the content area objectives. The researcher then scored each exit ticket and calculated an average of each class section's scores.

Data was collected in the same way for all three class sections. At the end of the lesson on the day Class Section One received the creative writing intervention, all students were given an exit ticket to complete. This exit ticket assessed each student's mastery of the content area

objectives, with some multiple-choice questions and some short answer questions. The researcher then scored each student's exit ticket, and then calculated an average of each class section's scores. The multiple-choice questions were worth one point each, and the short answer questions were scored on a scale of one to three points each. Short answer questions that assessed only basic recall of information were worth one point, while questions that required higher order thinking skills were worth up to three points. Students that demonstrated partial understanding of a question were able to receive partial credit according to this scale.

Findings

Data Analysis

Every fifth-grade student present on the day that Class Section One completed the creative writing intervention completed an exit ticket as an assessment of student mastery of social studies objectives. These exit tickets were designed to assess student mastery of content area objectives as well as content area critical thinking skills. The exit tickets included both multiple-choice questions and short answer questions. The multiple-choice questions and short answer questions combined were worth a total of ten points on each of the two exit tickets. The multiple-choice questions were based on factual content area objectives and were scored as worth one point each. The short answer questions were based on content area critical thinking skills and were scored on scales of zero to two or three points, depending on the complexity of the question. On questions worth two points, students received both points for responses that were correct and complete. Students received one point for responses that were partially correct but incomplete. Students received zero points if they did not include a response or if the response was incorrect. On questions worth three points, students received all three points for responses that were correct and demonstrated both high order thinking and a depth of understanding.

Students received two points for responses that were correct but lacked high order thinking or a depth of understanding. Students received one point for responses that were partially correct but incomplete. Students received zero points if they did not include a response or if the response was incorrect. Students were encouraged to complete every question, and to guess on questions that they were unsure how to answer. However, there were several students who still chose to leave some questions on the exit tickets blank.

Each student exit ticket was given a score out of ten points by totaling up the number of points earned on each question. The researcher carefully read student responses and assigned points to each response based on the accuracy, depth, and high order thinking demonstrated in each response. The researcher compiled the student scores into tables and then calculated a class average score for each class section. The first exit ticket was completed at the completion of the fifth social studies unit of the year, over the routes of exploration to the New World. On this exit ticket, students were asked to identify information about several different explorers, list some of the obstacles faced by the explorers in North America, list some of the accomplishments of the explorers in North America, and explain an area of conflict between the explorers and the Native Americans. They also had to explain how this area of conflict specifically affected the Native Americans.

Table 1

Student Scores on Unit 5 Exit Ticket: Routes of Exploration to the New World

Class section 1		Class section 2		Class section 3	
<u>Student</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Student</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Student</u>	<u>Score</u>
B01	4	N01	3	P01	5
B02	5	N02	7	P02	–
B03	6	N03	8	P03	5
B04	–	N04	3	P04	7

Table 1 (continued).

B05	2	N05	2	P05	5
B06	8	N06	5	P06	8
B07	7	N07	5	P07	5
B08	6	N08	8	P08	10
B09	7	N09	5	P09	8
B10	4	N10	8	P10	6
B11	6	N11	8	P11	7
B12	6	N12	6	P12	8
B13	9	N13	9	P13	0
B14	5	N14	3	P14	8
B15	5	N15	7	P15	7
B16	7	N16	4	P16	6
B17	5	N17	8	P17	5
B18	4	N18	2	P18	8
B19	–	N19	6	P19	6
Average	5.647	Average	5.632	Average	6.333

Note. – denotes that the student was absent and thus did not participate in the activity.

The second exit ticket was completed at the completion of the subsequent unit, over the early English settlements in America. In this unit, students learned about some of the causes and effects of the early English settlements that became the thirteen original colonies in North America. Students specifically focused on the colonies of Roanoke, Jamestown, and Plymouth. As they studied the important people, places, and events that took place in each colony, students developed an understanding of the reasons many settlers chose to move to the Americas. They were introduced to the idea of push and pull factors and began to identify specific push and pull factors that caused settlers to leave England for North America. As students read about and discussed each settlement, they were encouraged to imagine what life was like for the settlers in

each colony. On the exit ticket at the completion of this unit, students were asked to match important events with the colony in which they took place, list some of the problems the Jamestown settlers faced, list some of the reasons Jamestown grew and prospered, explain the difference between a push factor and a pull factor, and give an example of each.

Table 2

Student Scores on Unit 6 Exit Ticket: Early English Settlements

Class section 1		Class section 2		Class section 3	
<u>Student</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Student</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Student</u>	<u>Score</u>
B01	10	N01	8	P01	8
B02	5	N02	8	P02	6
B03	8	N03	4	P03	9
B04	7	N04	8	P04	3
B05	4	N05	2	P05	7
B06	9	N06	7	P06	9
B07	7	N07	6	P07	7
B08	6	N08	–	P08	8
B09	7	N09	7	P09	6
B10	3	N10	8	P10	6
B11	7	N11	9	P11	7
B12	7	N12	6	P12	3
B13	9	N13	9	P13	4
B14	7	N14	7	P14	9
B15	9	N15	9	P15	10
B16	9	N16	5	P16	10
B17	6	N17	8	P17	7
B18	5	N18	9	P18	5
B19	9	N19	9	P19	10
Average	7.053	Average	7.167	Average	7.053

Note. – denotes that the student was absent and thus did not participate in the activity.

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

The exit ticket data did not indicate that the creative writing intervention significantly helped students master the social studies objectives. In the first trial, Class Section One scored higher than Class Section Two, but lower than Class Section Three on their exit ticket responses. This shows that receiving the creative writing intervention did not cause the students in Class Section One to score either higher or lower than their peers, who did not receive the intervention. While some students in Class Section One were challenged to think about the unit concepts in a different way than their peers, as a result of completing the creative writing intervention, this did not necessarily help improve their scores on the exit ticket. The researcher noticed that some of these students were able to process the motivations behind the explorers' actions in a deeper way than that of their classmates, but this was not assessed on the exit ticket.

In the second trial, Class Section One scored exactly the same as Class Section Three, and Class Section Two scored the highest out of the three. Once again, this shows that receiving the creative writing intervention did not cause the students in Class Section One to score either higher or lower than their peers, who did not receive the intervention. In both the multiple-choice questions and the short answer questions, student responses varied widely in each class, regardless of whether or not they had completed the creative writing intervention. Once again, however, the researcher noticed that some students in Class Section One were challenged to think about the unit concepts in a deeper way as they imagined what it would be like to live in one of the early English settlements. While this was not assessed on the exit ticket, the researcher noticed that some of these students were beginning to better articulate the challenges the settlers faced than their peers. In considering the whole class averages on the exit tickets, one cannot

definitively conclude that the creative writing intervention had an effect on the students' mastery of content area skills or critical thinking skills. However, there were several external factors that may have influenced the results of the study.

Limitations of the Study

The study was completed over the course of about three months, from mid-January through mid-April. Unfortunately, this was a historic winter in West Michigan, where the study took place, and there were fourteen snow days over the course of those months. This greatly interfered with the learning process, as students often went several days in between social studies lessons. As a result, it may have been difficult for students to recall content that they had learned earlier in the unit when completing the creative writing activity. Additionally, the snow days interfered with the researcher's ability to conduct a more thorough investigation. The researcher had hoped to teach three curricular units over the course of the study, and thus conduct three separate trials of the creative writing intervention. However, due to the number of snow days, the researcher was only able to complete two curricular units during the course of the study and thus only conduct two trials of the creative writing intervention. Additional trials may have provided more significant patterns or trends than that which was revealed in the data.

There were also many students who were absent throughout the course of this study, even when school was in session. While it is typical for rounds of sickness to keep some students home during the winter months, in any school, there was a significant number of fifth-grade students who were also gone due to planned absences. Many families had planned vacations during the winter months, and as a result, there were many fifth-grade students who missed important social studies discussions and other in-class activities that could not be replicated outside of the classroom. During the month of February, for example, there was at least one

student gone due to a vacation every school day of the month. Many of these students happened to be in Class Section One, which may have caused them to score lower on their exit tickets. Due to these limitations, the researcher acknowledges that more research is needed in order to determine whether or not creative writing can help improve student achievement in the social studies classroom.

Further Study

In the future, the researcher hopes to continue this study by conducting more trials with students across a longer time frame. Being able to do more trials could help make the results of the study more accurate by providing more data. Additionally, giving students more creative writing prompts could help them to feel more comfortable with the process, thus removing any confusion or anxiety that they might have felt in these first two creative writing activities. By conducting the study over a longer period of time, there would also be less of an impact from student absences, such as those the researcher encountered over the course of this study. This would enable more students, regardless of whether or not they received the intervention, to complete the exit ticket with a stronger foundational understanding of the content that was taught in each unit. This would strengthen the accuracy of any data that might be collected, as the exit tickets would more accurately be assessing the effect of the creative writing on student achievement.

While the researcher cannot affirmatively conclude that the creative writing either improved or hindered student mastery of the content area skills and objectives, the researcher did notice other changes in the students who received the creative writing intervention. For example, the researcher noted that while completing the first writing prompt, many of the students in Class Section One were challenged to think about the concepts more deeply than their peers in Class

Sections Two and Three in order to complete the task. In order to write a journal entry from the perspective of a European explorer, for example, students were required to think through the motivations, thoughts, and feelings that an explorer at that time period would have experienced. While many students in Class Sections Two and Three expressed feelings of disgust and contempt for the explorers in class discussions, due mostly to their treatment of the Native Americans they encountered, the students in Class Section One seemed to develop a more nuanced perspective on the encounters between the explorers and Native Americans. While this did not necessarily help them to score any higher on the exit ticket, the researcher felt that this experience could have had a significant impact on the students' deeper understanding of the motivations behind the historical figures about whom they wrote, and it could have helped develop empathy in the students. In the future, the researcher would like to examine this phenomenon more closely, in order to determine whether or not creative writing in the social studies classroom helps foster more nuanced understanding or build empathy in students.

Conclusion

While the results of this action research project do not conclusively reveal whether or not creative writing helps improve student achievement in the social studies classroom, the research can serve as a springboard for future research. As previously explored, research has already shown that creative writing can improve student achievement in writing. At this point, more research is needed to determine whether or not the benefits of creative writing extend to students' mastery of social studies content area and skills objectives as well. However, in a time when social studies teachers are under intense pressure to balance all of their social studies instruction with the demands of other subject areas, more research must be done in order to determine which instructional practices have the potential to best improve student learning. The

researcher found that the creative writing intervention was simple to plan and prepare, and required no additional resources, technology, or skills from the teacher. This intervention was accessible to all students in her fifth-grade classroom, and it did not have any observable negative impact on student attitude. In the event that this intervention could help some students master the content area objectives, it could be implemented in virtually any social studies unit in any upper elementary classroom. Creative writing prompts could be tailored to best meet the needs of specific classrooms and could reflect the specific objectives set in any given classroom as well. This instructional strategy is therefore worth further research in the future.

Perhaps an unexpected result of the action research study was the insight it gave the researcher regarding the other ways the intervention challenged students. While the researcher sought to identify the effects of the intervention on students' mastery of content area skills and objectives, the researcher began to notice a change in the way the students thought about the content. While this change in thinking was not measured or documented officially, as it did not relate to the objectives of the study, the researcher was intrigued by the conversations she had with the students who participated in the creative writing activity. Their perspectives seemed to shift as students' understandings of historical events deepened, giving them more of a nuanced perspective on the world. As they sought to express in writing the actions each historical figure experienced, they also had to think through their motivations, thoughts, and feelings. With further practice, this sort of thinking could help students to better understand historical contexts or the causes and effects that shaped the course of history. Additionally, this could be an instructional strategy to help teachers incorporate some of their own objectives into the content area, aside from those laid out in the state and national standards. For example, creative writing could help students develop a sense of empathy towards people who lived centuries ago and may

have come from an entirely different perspective than our students do today. While this is not necessarily a skill that is assessed on state or national standards, being able to see the world from the perspective of another, and to empathize with them, is perhaps one of the most essential components of learning in any classroom.

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Appendix A**Social Studies Unit 5 Creative Writing
A Native American Journal**

Imagine that you are a Native American, and European explorers have recently landed on your island. Write an entry in your journal, telling about what you have observed. Your writing should include:

- A description of the explorers - What did they look like? Sound like? Smell like? Use your imagination and lots of sensory details.
- A story about one interaction with the explorers - How did you treat them? How did they treat you and the other members of your tribe?
- A question you have about the explorers and their way of life
- At least 2 areas of conflict that we have discussed in this unit - How have these areas of conflict affected you and your tribe already?

**Social Studies Unit 5 Creative Writing
An Explorer Log**

Imagine that you are one of the explorers we've learned about in this unit: Hernán Cortés, Francisco Coronado, John Cabot, or Jacques Cartier. Write an entry in your Explorer Log, telling of your adventures in the New World. Your writing should include:

- Your sponsor country
- Something that motivated you to explore the New World
- Your main accomplishment
- At least 2 obstacles that you faced on your journey
- A description of the Native Americans - What did they look like? Sound like? Smell like? Use your imagination and lots of sensory details.
- A story about one interaction with Native Americans - How did you treat the Native Americans? How did they treat you and your crew?

Appendix B

Name: _____

Social Studies Unit 5 Exit Ticket
Routes of Exploration to the New World

1. This explorer claimed Mexico for Spain:
 - a. Cortes
 - b. Cabot
 - c. Coronado
 - d. Cartier

2. This explorer learned farming techniques from Native Americans in eastern Canada:
 - a. Cortes
 - b. Cabot
 - c. Coronado
 - d. Cartier

3. This explorer learned from the Native Americans by bringing a chief back to France:
 - a. Cortes
 - b. Cabot
 - c. Coronado
 - d. Cartier

4. What were some of the obstacles faced by the explorers in North America? (List at least 2):

5. What were some of the accomplishments of the explorers in North America (List at least 2):

6. Tell me one area of conflict between the explorers and the Native Americans, and explain how this affected the Native Americans:

Appendix C
Social Studies Unit 6 Creative Writing
A Settler's Journal

Imagine that you are one of the Jamestown settlers. Write an entry in your journal, telling about your experience. Write 2 or 3 paragraphs describing about a day in your life, and describe your thoughts and feelings as you do so. Your writing should include:

- A few reasons you left England (push factors)
- A few reasons you wanted to live in the New World (pull factors). Have you actually found any of those pull factors since moving to Jamestown?
- Some of the problems you faced when you first established the settlement at Jamestown
- Some of the reasons Jamestown is growing and prospering now

Appendix D

Name: _____

Social Studies Unit 6 Exit Ticket
Early English Settlements

- 1. Chief Powhatan helped the settlers in this colony:
 - a. Roanoke
 - b. Jamestown
 - c. Plymouth

- 2. Squanto helped the settlers in this colony:
 - a. Roanoke
 - b. Jamestown
 - c. Plymouth

- 3. Captain John White left this colony to go back to England for supplies:
 - a. Roanoke
 - b. Jamestown
 - c. Plymouth

- 4. This is one reason the Jamestown settlement grew and prospered:
 - a. John Smith was a strong leader.
 - b. The Mayflower Compact helped keep the peace.
 - c. Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant, fish, and get syrup from trees.
 - d. John White brought back supplies from England.

5. What were some of the problems the Jamestown settlers faced? (List at least 2)

6. What were some of the reasons Jamestown grew and prospered? (List at least 2)

7. What is the difference between a push factor and a pull factor? Can you give me an example of each?

