

**"Is This Social Studies?"**  
**Inquiry's Place in Elementary Social Studies Curriculum**

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**Abstract:**

How can I get my second grade paleontologists to become second grade historians? After completing the *Prehistoric Life and Fossils* unit using the inquiry based *Mystery Dinosaur* addendum, I was amazed at the critical thinking skills, comprehension level, and enthusiasm my students had for dinosaurs. In planning for the next unit, *American Album*, I began to wonder, how I can I encourage my students to transfer their affection and comprehension from Dinosaurs to American history. This wondering led me to the idea that I could apply an inquiry-based approach to teaching American history. With a little imagination and help from a second grade classroom in Arizona my second grade class began an investigation into how America got started.

**Background Information****Teaching Context:**

Welcome to Room 20, here at Gray's Woods Elementary! I am a Professional Development School (PDS) intern, enjoying a full year of student teaching in the State College Area School District. I work alongside my mentor, two paraprofessionals, and nineteen enthusiastic and exceptional students in a self-contained classroom. The student body is composed of eight girls and eleven boys, age's seven to nine. Students' interests and demonstrated abilities represent a wide diversity of learners. The diversity of learners includes: an English Language Learner, three students that receive speech services, one student with a mathematical understanding of an excelled fourth grader, three students with a mathematical understanding of an excelled second grader, one student identified as having Downs syndrome, one student identified as having Emotional Support needs, and six students that receive Title I

services for reading. With such a diverse group of learners planning and implementing instruction that meets each student's instructional needs is an art form.

The art of teaching our diverse group of learners occurs on the canvas of our classroom environment. The classroom's physical and philosophical environment is conducive to collaboration and ingenuity. The physical environment is arranged around the students' desks; educational resources (computers, literature, manipulatives, paper, etc.) outline the perimeter of the classroom. Students are encouraged to utilize the entire classroom space. The students' desks are arranged into groups having four to five students per group. This arrangement of desks encourages students to converse and work together. The philosophical environment like the physical environment is centered on the students. My mentor and I share the perspective that a student-centered environment best serves the educational and emotional needs of the students. A student-centered approach to teaching encourages student-teacher collaboration, as well as, respecting and valuing the voice of everyone in the room. The educational philosophy, valuing student voice in the classroom encourages students to take pride and ownership of their learning as well as the activities that occur in the classroom, is the backdrop of our classroom environment.

**Rationale for Inquiry:**

The PDS teaching preparation program promotes the educational method of inquiry. My first introduction to the teaching method of inquiry was in my science methods course. I very quickly learned the power of inquiry. Inquiry is a philosophy of learning that encourages learners to take the driver's seat of their education. Learners are actively engaged in the design and implementation of the plan of study. Inquiry-based learning follows the learner's wonderings or questions about a subject matter and asks the important questions of "why do you know that" and "how do you know that?" Asking students how and why they know something is true

requires them to apply the knowledge or evidence they have gained from their exploration. Using evidence to explain exploration sets a clear purpose for the experiment/investigation, as well as, for the students.

I became further acquainted with inquiry-based education through the *Prehistoric Life and Fossils* unit in our second grade curriculum. This unit is accompanied by an addendum titled, *Mystery Dinosaurs*. The addendum applies an inquiry-based approach to investigating *Prehistoric Life and Fossils*. The *Mystery Dinosaur* addendum provides a scenario where the students assume the role of an amateur paleontologist. An important part about being an amateur paleontologist is that you seek out guidance from experienced paleontologists. Students receive letters from fictitious professional paleontologists hunting for traces of dinosaurs around the world. The letters provide clues and insight into the possible identification of a dinosaur. Students worked within paleontology teams to establish wonderings, conduct experiments, collect evidence, and draw conclusions about the identity of their mystery dinosaur.

The natural interest of second graders in the study of dinosaurs was compounded by the inquiry-based approach to introducing the information. Students were absorbed with the hunt to investigate and identify their mystery dinosaur. They would squirm in their seats, anxiously waiting for the moment they would be handed the most recent letter from their paleontologists' colleagues. In addition to the role-play, the unit lessons were filled with opportunities to investigate the students' wonderings, explore fossils and dinosaur traces, explain their findings using evidence from exploration, and elaborate on their previous knowledge from the most recent exploration. Students drew meaningful connections between their investigations and the investigations of professional paleontologist. I was taken back by the evidence students referred to while explaining their understandings. They developed a meaningful and complex

understanding of how fossils are formed and the clues fossils provide into the past. Students became so engrossed in their learning that all they could think, talk, write, and draw about were dinosaurs. Some students were so excited to learn more about dinosaurs that they took it upon themselves to conduct outside research about fossils, body types, and habits of dinosaurs.

In awe of the results of the unit, I am convinced that inquiry is a powerful teaching tool, a tool that opens students' minds to a plethora of learning opportunities and helps them to develop meaningful connections to information. Teaching the *Mystery Dinosaur* addendum instilled a desire within me to use inquiry as a teaching method. Empowered by the effects of inquiry-based learning, I decided that I wanted to continue this rich and meaningful level of comprehension into our next unit of study, *American Album*. In preparing for the *American Album* unit, I began to notice a lack of opportunities for students to directly explore and connect with the information provided in the unit. I did recognize a language arts approach to the unit, where students engaged with information through literary resources and teacher presentations. I appreciate this style of delivering content, however, I began to wonder whether a social studies based unit could deliver information through an inquiry-based approach.

**Academic Perspectives:**

In investigating the elements of a successful social studies curriculum, I found guidance from *The National Council for the Social Studies* (NCSS). The NCSS has formed guidelines to support good practices in social studies instruction and learning. The NCSS believes that social studies curriculum should relate to the age, maturity, and concerns of students, as well as, foster students to make connections to social studies content within their own lives. The NCSS also recognizes the need for students to be engaged directly and actively in the learning process (2002). Inquiry-based education can fulfill these needs. The purpose of inquiry is to create curriculum that relates to the age, maturity, and concerns of the student, as well as, to assist

students in creating meaningful connections to the content. The guidelines for excellence in social studies education identified by the NCSS are directly implemented by the practices of inquiry-based education.

A common belief is that the purpose of social studies education is to help students develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions (NCSS, 2002). This belief supports the development of critical thinking and reasoning skills. John W. Saye and Thomas Brush noted the five competencies of higher-order critical reasoning researched by Newmann (1991) in the article *Scaffolding Critical Reasoning About History and Social Sciences in Multimedia-supported Learning Environments* (2002). The five competencies of higher-order critical reasoning in social studies are:

“(a) Thinkers must have empathy, an ability to view the world from the perspective of another. They must be able (b) to apply abstract concepts to specific situations and (c) to infer beyond limited data to draw conclusions. They must be able (d) to engage in critical discourse aimed at clarifying understanding about an issue and (e) to apply evaluative criteria to develop defensible decisions about a social problem”(Newmann, 1991).

These competencies of critical reasoning uphold the objectives of the Roger Bybee’s 5E model of inquiry education (engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate). In both the 5E model and Newmann’s five competencies of critical thinking, students are expected to relate abstract concepts to their own experiences and explain their understandings with evidence. These expectations are aimed at assisting students in developing a more meaningful understanding of concepts.

Developing higher-order critical thinking skills is not an easy task for second graders; therefore the “[g]uidance by a skilled teacher is crucial to this process...” (Saye, 2002). The

concept of the classroom teacher as a guide in learning is also supported in the philosophy of inquiry. In inquiry the teacher's role is to oversee student exploration, probe students during exploration, and guide students in directions that will foster connections between concepts. The goal of social studies education in respect to critical thinking skills is to provide students with guided and independent experiences in problem solving situations, which can be achieved through inquiry-based learning.

The legislation of No Child Left Behind has created a need for educators to re-examine current social studies curriculum and social studies instruction practices. Rahima Wade voices the need for change in the article *Beyond Expanding Horizons: New Curriculum Directions for Elementary Social Studies* (2002). Investigating alternative approaches to social studies education for primary grade students Wade concludes that "...Educators do not always have to teach the here and now, even to young children, but they do need to present children with learning opportunities that allow them to connect with the topics under study, either through personal experience or emotional interest" (2002). This conclusion promotes the idea that young students study of social studies does not need to be limited to what is directly around them. Primary grade students can tackle historical concepts as long as they have opportunities to interact with "...real and relevant experiences in which children can initiate their own learning, construct knowledge, and engage in age-appropriate and individually appropriate activities" (Wade, 2002).

A new model for social studies curriculum, *Toward the Common Good*, structures curriculum so that in each year "...students will learn about historical and geographical aspects of the theme, consider how this theme relates to their life experiences, explore connections between the theme and the other social sciences through active learning strategies, and conduct

one of several Civic Action Projects (CAPs) in the school or community” (Wade, 2002). This model for social studies education provides built in opportunities for students to engage in the content, explore how themes relate to their own lives, and elaborate on the theme by participating in a school or community project. Primary grade students are able to explore and investigate the abstract concepts of history, as long as, their teachers create opportunities for personal connections to be formed. Educators are responding to the need for change in social studies education and many are finding inspiration in the philosophy and objectives of inquiry-based education.

**Wonderings:**

After completing the *Prehistoric Life and Fossils* unit using the inquiry-based *Mystery Dinosaur* addendum, I was amazed at the critical thinking skills, comprehension level, and enthusiasm my students had for dinosaurs. In planning for the next unit, *American Album*, I began to wonder, how can I get my second grade paleontologists to become second grade historians? This wondering led me to further wonderings about the possibility of introducing the principles of inquiry to social studies curriculum.

- ❖ Does inquiry have a place in social studies curriculum at the elementary level?
- ❖ Can I transform a teacher directed American History unit into an inquiry-based American History unit?
- ❖ In an inquiry-based social studies unit, will students relate to the content more easily?
- ❖ In an inquiry-based social studies unit, will students generate connections to content more easily?
- ❖ In an inquiry-based social studies unit, will students construct a more meaningful comprehension of the subject matter?

- ❖ Will students be further engaged in their learning if provided a voice in the content of the curriculum?

### **Inquiry Plan**

#### **Implementing the Plan:**

Developing curriculum for a unit of study requires planning, organization, resourcefulness, and time. Two weeks before the kickoff of the *American Album* unit, I found myself sitting around a table with my fellow interns and mentors for unit planning. As I listened to the discussions about preparation for the unit, I quickly understood the undertaking I brought on myself. It was at this moment that I realized that I would need to conduct my own inquiry unit-planning meeting; a meeting that's goal would be to construct the circumstances of the unit, as well as, outline the structure of the content.

#### **Step One: Preparing for Unit Planning**

I organized a meeting with my mentor teacher and Professional Development Associate (PDA) to discuss plans for the unit two weeks prior to launching the unit. I asked them to bring any resources they have used in conjunction with the *American Album* unit or American history related units and to bring their creativity. I personally prepared for inquiry unit planning by reading the *American Album* unit and unit addendum. I wanted to familiarize myself with the content and objectives outlined by the district, as to be aware of what content areas I would need to cover in my revision of the unit. In addition, I reviewed the Pennsylvania State standards and the State College Area School District objectives for social studies curriculum. I felt it important to align the curriculum with the standards addressed by the state and the district, because the content addressed in the standards is the content expected to be taught and learned by the end of second grade. (See Appendix A)

## Step Two: Unit Planning

During our inquiry unit-planning meeting we brainstormed contexts for this inquiry-based unit, we brainstormed responses to the question, how can we introduce the unit; what will be the scenario that delivers and/or incites learning; how can we make the history of America related to second graders; what scenarios or experiences can we create to serve as the basis for drawing connections? We came up with three main contexts: we will propose to students that we will be building a new country in order to form a more perfect country, we will propose to the students that we will be separating ourselves from Gray's Woods Elementary school in order to form a more perfect school, or that in the United States a new school has just been opened, but they are missing some important finishing touches, and they are seeking the help of our classroom in providing advice and guidance in completing their school.

Each scenario had its pros and cons. The first scenario, creating a new country, would obviously be easy to draw parallels with the history of the United States of America; however, we felt that this scenario was on too large of a scale. Creating a country is a difficult task even for educated and mature adults; therefore, we felt that it would be too challenging for second graders. The second scenario brought a new country to a more kid friendly level. Students are familiar with the structure of a school and parallels could still be easily drawn between starting a new school and the start of the United States of America, but we felt that the students may feel entitled to put their suggestions for change into action. And this potential desire may potentially distract students from the parallels to our country's history. In the last scenario, we found a balance between relatedness and distance. By setting up a scenario where a school somewhere in the country is experiencing change, my second graders can relate to school factors and they can separate themselves from the situation. This scenario creates a comfortable distance for students

to observe, engage, and evaluate the content. It was decided, the scenario for the inquiry-based *American Album* unit will be a new school has opened up in Arizona, students from a second grade classroom from the new school are corresponding with our class to gain advice and suggestions for the finishing touches in their school. A pen pal correspondence will be created between the fictitious new school and our school in State College.

I felt confident in this approach, because I had witnessed the engagement and excitement of the students during our correspondence with fictitious paleontologists during the *Mystery Dinosaur* unit. The students eagerly awaited letters from their paleontologist. When a letter would arrive they would rip open the envelope and animatedly read the letter, looking for clues as to their mystery dinosaur's identification. The letters also served as a great source to structure lessons and class discussions. It was my goal to embody the excitement and purpose that was in the paleontology letters for the *American Album* pen pal letters.

After deciding the scenario for the *American Album* unit to exist in, my mentor teacher and I discussed the possible parallels between a school and the United States of America. We determined the following parallels: that naming the school parallels the naming of the United States of America, an announcement of the school's opening parallels the writing of the Declaration of Independence, a school pennant parallels the United States flag, a school cheer/song parallels the National Anthem, a school mascot parallels the bald eagle and Uncle Sam, a class pledge parallels the pledge of allegiance, school rules parallel the Constitution, a welcome to the new school parallels the Statue of Liberty, and a monument or memorial to their old school parallels U.S. monuments and memorials.

Inspiration for the content of parallels arose from the content and objectives of the *American Album* unit. The original unit addressed major concepts about the birth of the United

States of America, and in revising the unit I still wanted to communicate and teach the ideals incorporated within the unit. Additional concepts of American History were developed from the ideals referred to in the Pennsylvania State standards for Social Studies education. Therefore, the objectives of the *American Album* unit and the Pennsylvania State standards served as the conditions for my inquiry-based unit. These parallels served as a basic structure for the lessons of the unit and the ideals of the unit served as unit objectives.

### **Step Three: Sequencing the Unit**

The unit objectives developed into a rough sequence of activities and concepts for the unit. I created a timeline of the unit's concepts by organizing the parallels into a logical format, so that student understandings could be built upon previous understandings. I also tried to mimic the events and decisions of the founding fathers; therefore, I tried to structure topics so that they would be introduced parallel to when they were introduced into American history/culture. (**See Appendix B**) I outlined six weeks of lessons, three lessons each week for the inquiry-based unit. Weeks were designed to include: a lesson introducing the topic of the week through our correspondence with the new school in Arizona, a lesson introducing the topic parallel to U.S. history, and a lesson comparing and contrasting the school topic with the U.S. history topic.

I planned six weeks of lessons for an eight week designated period of time, because I was not sure how long it would take us to get through each objective. Also, I wanted to allow for enough time. I also planned for six weeks so that in the last two weeks we could revisit or extend one of the previous lessons into more depth. Having a two-week grace period would also alleviate the stress of trying to cram in information or lessons. I wanted to give the unit's lessons ample time to develop on the students terms and not time's terms. In addition, this unit being inquiry-based I felt that it was important to leave time open to investigate questions or concerns

brought up by the students and/or spend an extended length of time on an objective that deeply engaged the students.

#### **Step Four: Filling in the Disparities**

After establishing the scenario and outline of the unit, my mentor teacher and I discussed possible extension or supplemental activities for the unit. There were certain standards and objectives I felt were not well represented in the outline of the unit's concepts, because of this I wanted to make sure that these standards would be communicated through another activity. This desire to embody the standards led me to a supplemental learning activity called, "Where in the USA is Gretzky?" (See **Appendix C**)

"Where in the USA is Gretzky?" activity is a spoof on the *Where in the World is Carmen Santiago* trend of my childhood. In this activity my mentor teacher's beloved chocolate lab would go on an adventure to all fifty states in the USA. On her journey she would send back clues about her location in the United States. The students would keep an active record of her whereabouts in their "Where in the USA is Gretzky?" notebooks. The students would be responsible for writing the three clues Gretzky has provided, making a guess as to where they think she is, coloring the corresponding state in on their map once they are aware of her correct location, and labeling the state with its abbreviation. As a class, we recorded Gretzky's journey on two maps. We had one map in the classroom that we colored and labeled and we had a huge wall map outside our classroom that we filled in like a puzzle as Gretzky moved across the USA. The objective of this activity was to familiarize the students with the states of the United States of America as well as sharpen their geographical and map skills.

An extension activity that developed from the "Where in the USA is Gretzky?" activity, which decorated the room for the unit and acted as an introductory activity, involved the students

investigating the fifty states. To better acquaint the students with the states and reinforce the concept of the difference between a state and a country, students in pairs selected a state to study. The pairs read fact books on the state they selected. The students then selected four facts about their state, one of those facts being about the state's flag. Students then wrote one state fact per note card. On one side of the note card students recorded the fact and on the other side they pasted a printed picture of the fact. For example, a common state fact described the state's bird, students would write on one side of the card "Illinois state bird is the Red Cardinal." On the other side of the card they would paste a picture of a Red Cardinal. After writing and illustrating four fact cards the pairs traced their states' shape onto construction paper, cut it out, and labeled it with its abbreviation. The state was then complete! Students turned in their state facts to my mentor and I. We then prepared the state and its facts to be hung from the ceiling. All of the fifty states and their facts were hung from the ceiling in our classroom; we created a fifty state mobile. These supplemental activities fulfilled the standards and objectives not directly taught in the content of the inquiry-based lessons. With the basic structure of the unit in place, I turned my attention to the unit specifics. **(See Appendix D)**

### **Step Five: Planning the Unit Introduction**

One week prior to the unit's start I began to draft the initial introduction to the unit. In planning for the introduction I knew I needed to convince my students that it was plausible for an elementary school across the country to write to us. I also needed to make sure that in my first letter I provided enough information to answer the students' initial questions about the school and the class that was writing to us. In my first letter I explained why a school was opened in the middle of the school year, how the students knew of our school, and the purpose for them writing to us. A major part, or missing part, of the letter was that I did not include the name of the school

in Arizona. The purpose for omitting the school name was to immediately engage students with the scenario. I wanted to instill that inquisitive and investigative tone from the first minute of the unit. In addition to the letter, I composed a special package. In the package I included clues about the school, the student population, and the area and state they live in. The package contained the following items: a map of the state of Arizona, a picture of a new school building, a plastic lizard and scorpion, a picture of the Arizona state flag, a picture of Arizona's state bird, a picture of the Grand Canyon, and a mini-basketball. It was my goal that students would relate to these objects and use them as a source of inspiration in constructing their suggestions and ideas for the students of the new school. **(See Appendix E)**

### **Step Six: Lesson Planning**

A week prior to the beginning of the inquiry-based unit I planned lessons for the first two weeks of the unit. In planning the lessons, I followed the unit outline established during our mini-unit planning session, referenced the state and district standards and objectives, researched the content through literature and the Internet, referenced the 5E model of an inquiry based learning cycle by Roger Bybee, thought about the interests, strengths, and weaknesses of my students, and referenced student materials available in the Gray's Woods Library. After considering all of the available resources, I began to brainstorm possible activities that would engage my students physically and mentally.

I wanted students to be a part of the lessons, to physically and cognitively construct their own understanding of the message/purpose of the lesson. While brainstorming activities for the lessons I often would refer to the 5E model of inquiry (engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate). I tried to structure activities in the lesson or over the course of two lessons that would apply all 5E's. I felt it was important to inquiry and my purpose of the unit to plan and provide

opportunities where students were engaged with the content, had the ability to explore a concept, were then asked to explain their claims based on evidence gathered during exploration, elaborate on concepts by creating or revising an activity, and evaluating or comparing and contrasting the school concept to the historical concept. It is my belief that the 5E model constructs an opportunity for students to connect with and comprehend abstract concepts on a meaningful and developmentally appropriate level.

I also wanted to plan activities that would be flexible and welcome student input and direction. I wanted to see my lessons and activities take wings when introduced to the imagination and ideas of nineteen second graders. With this intention in mind, I often created lessons that could be classified as open ended, but rather my lessons invited students to learn by accessing any one of the several different routes of the lesson. In preparing lessons, I would constantly think of where this lesson may redirect to or where students would lose enthusiasm; because of this pre-reflecting and anticipation of where problems may arise I would routinely plan for detours. This generated in my creating plan A's and plan B's for multiple lessons, where I anticipated some reluctance among the class.

On top of my own revision, I would submit my lessons one week in advance to my mentor teacher. I would ask her to read over my lessons in order to assist me in anticipating lesson areas of weakness, areas where misconceptions may arise, and areas where students may need more support or direction. A lot of forethought was devoted while constructing the inquiry-based American Album unit as to assure that the content would be delivered in the most valuable way for the students. **(See Appendix F)**

### **Step Seven: Constructing the Pen Pal Letters**

Each introductory lesson was planned to be introduced through a letter from our pen pals from Arizona. In the letters, the students from Arizona were to share a situation, problem, or question they were dealing with at their brand new school. At the end of the letter they would invite us to help them brainstorm ideas and/or solutions. The letters purpose was to incite engagement in the students and to stimulate class discussions about the situation or question. In addition to the content of the letters, I also planned for the letters to address formal and informal letter writing formats. Within the grand lesson of American history lay a small lesson on the different styles of letter writing.

Since our pen pals were fictitious it was my responsibility to construct each letter used in the unit. In the week before the unit began, I set aside time to create the first four letters of the unit. As I constructed the letters I needed to keep in mind the scenario we were setting up, the language of second graders, and believability among my students. **(See Appendix G)**

### **Step Eight: Teaching the Unit**

I quickly realized that the inquiry-based *American Album* unit was going to consume much of our instructional time. This became especially apparent during an introductory lesson on our pen pal's class developed classroom pledge. I introduced and read the letter from our Arizona friends, who discussed that they thought their class needed a daily reminder of their class' rules and ideals; because of this discussed need they decided to construct a class pledge that they would say each morning after they said the Pledge of Allegiance. As I asked my class if they think we would like to construct a class pledge, I heard a mixed response of intense "yes's" and intense "no's." This varied and intense response caused me to want to inquire further into the reasons for their position on creating a classroom flag. As I dove into the reasons of why we

shouldn't have a classroom pledge, I discovered that they felt we needed something to pledge to; we needed a classroom flag! When the idea of a classroom flag evolved from the conversation eyes lit up and hands bolted into the air. The classroom was a frenzy of excitement and engagement. The entire class felt very strongly that we needed a classroom flag before we could create a class pledge. The students also supported their claim by referring to the American flag. They made note that the American flag was one of the first things created during America's early independence. Amazed at the reason for why they did not think a class pledge was yet appropriate, I eagerly agreed that a classroom flag was indeed needed. This conclusion detoured our class pledge lesson into a new and exciting direction. Bursting at the seams with ideas I handed out paper and invited students to work collaboratively or alone on designing a flag for our classroom. This lesson made me aware that the inquiry-based unit would consume a substantial part of our days and weeks.

While reflecting on the class pledge lesson and looking to the lessons ahead, I began to realize the many different directions and detours this unit may take. With the excitement and engagement of the students there was no limit to where the unit may go.

**Methods of Data Collection:**

I selected a variety of methods in which to collect data on the success and effects of the inquiry-based unit. I collected data by:

- Student Work: *American Album* notebooks, unit projects, and student written letters to Desert Shadows Elementary will be collected throughout the unit. Collecting student work provides a window into the students' levels of understanding, connections being made, and areas of uncertainty.
- Personal, mentor teacher, and PDA's observations of class discussions discussed in the minutes after the end of the discussion. Classroom observations from my mentor and

PDA will provide an outside, seasoned teaching perspective as to the success of lessons in terms of student engagement, understanding, and connectedness with the content.

Personal observations will provide feedback to the quality and clarity of the lesson and in identifying any areas of content that may need to be revisited and/or elaborated.

- Videotape footage of unit activities, student explanations using evidence, and class discussions will be reviewed at the end of the school day the videotape footage was taken. Videotape footage will capture quotes and explanations from the students that may be missed during the excitement of a lesson or activity.
- Personal reflections on the outcome of lessons will be conducted in the time after the lesson has ended and during weekly planning for next week's lessons. Personal reflections will provide feedback to the quality and clarity of instruction, perceived student interest level, and in identifying any areas of content that may require additional attention/time.
- End of the Unit reflection and discussion with my mentor teacher and PDA. Final unit reflection will be attended to during the last week of the unit. A final de-briefing of the unit will provide an overview of the unit and overall evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the unit. A final reflection will also provide a look back at where we started as a class in our understanding of early American history and where our understanding is now.

**Analyzing Data:**

- Student work was analyzed throughout the course of the implementation of the inquiry-based unit. I examined student work for explanations based on evidence from previous knowledge and from newly acquired knowledge. I closely examined their justifications for symbols in order to clarify the students' definitions of symbolism. I also compared the

quality of explanations over the duration of the unit to see for progress and improvements in understanding or connectedness with the content. Student work demonstrated to me the range of understanding about the subject matter of the lesson.

- Class discussions were analyzed directly after the end of the conversation. I often de-briefed/analyzed the class discussions first as a check on clarity of the lesson and to gauge the students' engagement during the lesson. Analyzing classroom discussion data proved to be the most influential in my lesson planning process. I took into consideration wonderings and ideas brought up by the students in order to create future unit lessons that appealed to their interests and provided opportunities to explore and search out explanations for their wonderings.
- Personal, mentor, and PDA observations of unit lessons provided feedback on the clarity of the lesson, student interest in content demonstrated, and ideas of where to go next.
- Videotape footage was analyzed the night after the lesson was taught. The videotape footage provided student pearls of wisdom and in the moment explanations using newly acquired evidence.
- Personal reflections guided the lesson planning process throughout the unit, identified areas of instructional approach changes, and creative ideas for future activities and lessons. I relied heavily on personal reflections to guide my teaching for future lessons and to gauge the comprehension of students on a particular content area.
- End of the unit discussion and reflection with mentor teacher and PDA was conducted in the days of the final week of the *American Album* unit. During the de-briefing of the unit we discussed the growth in understanding observed, student engagement throughout the

unit, success of the unit in terms of level of understanding held by the students, and student initiated interest and elaboration within and outside of the classroom.

### **Learnings from Inquiry**

In conducting an investigation on the effects of using an inquiry approach to social studies education, I have gained the following learnings:

**Claim A: The philosophy of inquiry can be utilized in social studies curriculum and instruction.**

**Evidence 1A: The inquiry-based *American Album* unit I developed for a social studies focused curriculum.**

I successfully created lessons and activities that applied Roger Bybee's 5 E model of an inquiry based learning cycle. The lessons I developed provided students with opportunities to engage in their learning, explore content, explain explorations with evidence, elaborate on the initial experience, and evaluate their claims/conclusions and the evidence they collected. **(See appendix F)** The American Album unit also was structured to embrace the *Essential Features of Classroom Inquiry and Their Variations* (NRC, 2000, p.29). Students engaged in questions posed by them, selected from a list of questions, and questions provided by the teacher. In all curriculum activities students used evidence to explain and justify their conclusions and suggestions. Learners also had the opportunity to connect explanations with historical literature and research. Students sought out reference materials to support explanations and were provided with and encouraged to utilize reference materials around the classroom. As a last essential feature of inquiry students communicated and justified their explanations clearly and logically using their previous knowledge and the knowledge gained through exploration and research.

**Claim B: Teacher-directed units of instruction can be transformed into an inquiry-based unit of instruction.**

**Evidence 1B: The inquiry-based American Album unit I developed for a social studies focused curriculum.**

I successfully created lessons and activities that applied Roger Bybee's 5 E model of an inquiry-based learning cycle. The lessons I developed provided students with opportunities to engage in their learning, explore content, explain explorations with evidence, elaborate on the initial experience, and evaluate their claims/conclusions and the evidence they collected. (See **appendix F**)

Each lesson within the unit provided an opportunity for students to engage in a historical phenomenon, for example: writing the Declaration of Independence, creating the U.S. flag to represent the country, selecting a national symbol, writing a national anthem, and writing a pledge of allegiance. Students were then engaged through planned activities to explore such phenomenon. Students began exploring historical concepts by creating such a concept at a school level for our friends at Desert Shadows Elementary School. This exploration allowed students to use their previous knowledge and their ingenuity in order to create a school opening announcement, school pennant, school mascot, etc. Exploration was then elaborated on by introducing the parallel to the school phenomenon the national phenomenon. Students then engaged in lessons and activities that investigated the design, purpose, and symbolism of the Declaration of Independence, U.S. flag, the Bald Eagle and Uncle Sam, The Star Spangled Banner, and The Pledge of Allegiance. After exploring the national phenomenon students were then asked to go back to their exploration activities to explain the design, purpose, and symbolism of their school concepts by using the evidence they gained during the elaboration

component of the lessons. Lastly, students evaluated the school level and national level concepts by comparing and contrasting the two in order to identify common themes or differences. Early American history content can be delivered through an inquiry approach.

**Claim C: An inquiry approach to social studies instruction increases students' abilities to relate to the material.**

**Evidence 1C: Student Work**

During the monuments and memorials scavenger hunt activity students created a postcard of their favorite monument or memorial they visited. In their postcards to family or friends, the students explained their interest in the monument or memorial by citing a personal relation to the monument or memorial. For the Wright Brothers Memorial, students often cited that they have an interest in airplanes or flying airplanes just as the Wright Brothers did. For the Lincoln Memorial, students cited that Abraham Lincoln was their favorite President because he was honest; and honesty is an important quality for a leader or person to possess. For the Jefferson Memorial, students cited interest because they enjoyed the inscriptions of phrases from the Declaration of Independence on the memorial. They supported their enjoyment of the memorial by sharing that they loved the ideas written in the Declaration of Independence (**See Appendix L**).

While drawing a design for our classroom flag students often related design elements to themselves, the classroom, the school, Pennsylvania, and the United States of America. Students added design elements that included their favorite colors, the favorite colors of everyone in the class, the room number, stars for each person in the classroom, stripes for the amount of primary division classrooms in the school, Pennsylvania state tree and flower, and the colors red and white from the U.S. flag because they stand for courage and goodness. Students related the

purpose of symbols directly to themselves, their classmates, their state, and their country (**See Appendix J**).

### **Evidence 2C: Class Discussions**

Class discussions are a great source of evidence to support the claim that an inquiry-based unit encouraged students to relate to the material and fostered connections. Students felt comfortable and routinely drew parallels between our creations for Desert Shadows Elementary and the creations for the United States of America. During lessons where the U.S. parallel was being introduced students often were able to identify the parallel before it was introduced. The students were able to relate content to their lives and current events; the following are excerpts from our class discussions throughout the unit:

- Student A, “Our classroom is like a state and our school is like a country, so our classroom flag is like a state flag.”
- Student B, We should have six stripes on our classroom flag because there are six primary division classes and they are like the six original classrooms just as the thirteen stripes on the flag represent the thirteen original colonies in America.
- Student A, If states and countries have symbols then, as a class, we need symbols too (state tree, state bird, state flower, state/national song, nickname for flag)
- The Statue of Liberty is like a very special birthday present that means a lot, because France gave us the Statue of Liberty on America’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- Student C, Francis Belamy wrote the Pledge of Allegiance, Francis is the same first name of Francis Scott Key who wrote the Star Spangled Banner, which was a poem before it became a song.

- Student B, The Star Spangled Banner was originally a poem and then became a song. Then, we can make the poem of The Pledge of Allegiance into a song too.
- Student D, The Desert Shadow Pennant pictured on top of the letter has changed. I guess it changed like the US flag has changed over time.
- Color symbolism of the US flag was related to the colors we see during certain seasons and objects that share those colors. Red stands for courage and our heart is red. Blue stands for justice just like how police officers wear blue uniforms. White stands for goodness just like new snow.
- The rules we have in our classroom and school are sort of like the laws we have for our country.
- During a discussion about how Francis Scott Key's got his inspiration to write the Star Spangled Banner from a battle during the American Revolution students began to parallel or relate the American Revolution to the war in Iraq. Both wars are being fought to free people from a mean leader.

**(See Appendix F)**

### **Evidence 3C: Mentor and PDA observations on lessons**

Reviewing the American Album inquiry-based lessons with my mentor and PDA provided extra ears to pick up on students relating and connecting to the content. My PDA's observation notes frequently mentioned how the students were transferring knowledge between Desert Shadows creations and National symbols and concepts. Throughout the course of the unit my PDA and mentor made note of the students connections with the content. In one lesson discussing symbolism of mascots, my mentor teacher noted that I introduced a connection between college mascots and state symbols. After introducing the Blue Hens for the University

of Delaware and the Buckeyes for the Ohio State University, I was able to create an opportunity for students to relate their knowledge from the state mobiles to mascots. We discussed that pride in a state symbol is often considered in selecting a mascot. Her observation notes noticed that this connection encouraged students to broaden their understanding of the symbolism and meaning of mascots. (See Appendix M)

**Claim D: An inquiry approach to social studies instruction increases students' meaningful comprehension of the material.**

**Evidence 1D: Student Work**

Designing a pennant for Desert Shadows Elementary School demonstrated students' rich understanding of symbolism. Students realized that each design element needed to have a purpose or meaning to the students of Desert Shadows Elementary. Students considered the characteristics of Desert Shadows they were aware of and took the care to use them in their designs. Students included the following design elements in their pennants: desert scenes because the name of the school and the climate of their town, shadows because of the name of the school, brown, gold, red, yellow colors to represent the heat of the desert and the colors of the Arizona state flag, cacti, lizards, and scorpions were added to pennants to represent the wildlife that lives in Arizona, and basketballs because Desert Shadows Elementary has an intramural basketball team. Student explanations for including specific design elements demonstrated their understanding of the purpose of symbolism (See Appendix I).

Another student activity that demonstrated students' meaningful understanding of symbolism included adapting our classroom flag design in order to better represent our class. The students voted and selected a classroom flag design that included a bobcat mascot design. When I asked the students how a bobcat represented our classroom the only reason shared was “a

bobcat is strong and we are strong too.” I then challenged students to think of a different animal that better represented the spirit and characteristics of our classroom. In order to help students select a class mascot I asked the students to brainstorm characteristics of our class. Students shared a long list of characteristics that included: enthusiastic, smart, hard workers, team players, creative, etc. Students then brainstormed animals that shared or represented those same qualities. Students wrote down their suggestions for a class mascot to be included on the flag and supported their suggestions with reasons/evidence why that animal best represents our class. Students’ suggestions included a bear, fox, monkey, jaguar, bees, and much more (**See Appendix J**).

Students substantiated their understanding of the common themes between creations for Desert Shadows Elementary and creations for the United States of America by comparing and contrasting the two using a variety of graphic organizers. Students listed the similarities and differences between symbols and phenomenon. Students often recognized there were more meaningful similarities between the two situations than differences. They often commented that the differences were superficial ones, such as, how they were written or who wrote them. The graphic organizers, Venn diagrams and spider comparisons, provided a visual format for students to demonstrate their multi-layered understandings of the unit concepts (**See Appendix K**).

### **Evidence 2D: Mentor and PDA observations on lessons**

My mentor and PDA routinely observed my inquiry-based *American Album* unit lessons. Their observations provided evidence of students demonstrating a meaningful comprehension of unit concepts. The students frequently related the content to their own understandings, which helped them construct a deep and meaningful understanding of the lessons objectives and concepts. In a lesson discussing the purpose and importance of the Declaration of Independence

my PDA noted that the students redefined the term “independence” to mean, “... doing something on your own.” Redefining unit related terms shows me that the students have a firm grasp on the concept because they are able to explain it using different terms. This situation was revisited during our evaluation of the Pledge of Allegiance. As a class the students redefined difficult vocabulary in the Pledge of Allegiance to better understanding its meaning and importance. As cited by my mentor, students were able to find synonyms for pledge, allegiance, indivisible, liberty, union, justice by connecting the terms to previous experiences with the vocabulary and newly constructed knowledge from unit activities (See Appendix M).

**Claim E: An inquiry approach to social studies instruction encouraged student engagement, elaboration, and ingenuity.**

**Evidence 1E: Student Work**

Students demonstrated interest and excitement throughout the unit. Social studies became a part of the day the students anticipated and enjoyed. The unit activities were often welcomed with an enthusiasm and an impatience to get started. Students engaged in activities that encouraged them to elaborate on their existing knowledge through exploration and evaluation. Student ingenuity also allowed them to elaborate on their understanding of unit concepts. Students demonstrated elaboration and ingenuity in the following pieces of student work: creating a school opening announcement, school pennant for the students of Desert Shadows, creating a classroom flag, creating a classroom song using the tune of “You’re A Grand Ole Flag,” creating a mascot for Desert Shadows, creating a mascot for our classroom, and creating a brochure for their favorite U.S. monument/memorial (See Appendix H -L).

**Evidence 2E: Class Discussions**

American History intrigued some students more than others. Some of my second graders researched concepts we were studying in class on the Internet and then excitedly brought in their outside research to share with the class. Other students brought in vacation memorabilia from places they visited that we were currently studying. Throughout the day students I would often overhear student conversations, which involved a discussion about the most recent unit concept. *American Album* related discussion surprisingly showed up during a community building activity, Classroom Friend, students would often ask the classroom friend of the week what their favorite state was, what was their favorite state flag, who was their favorite U.S. president, and much more.

Student ingenuity quickly became the theme of the inquiry-based unit. Lessons often detoured due to student ingenuity. While considering creating a classroom pledge like our friends at Desert Shadows students decided that we would need to pledge to something, we would need a flag. Creativity filled the air, students began excitedly sharing ideas and planning a design for our classroom flag. With the enthusiasm of the class, I decided that designing a classroom flag would be a great activity. Students eagerly began the design process. After deciding on having a classroom flag students were then inspired to create a classroom song and a nickname for the flag, as well as, have a classroom tree, flower, and animal just like each state has in the United States of America. An inquiry-based unit not only welcomes creative detours, it encourages them. I feel that by using an inquiry-based approach to the *American Album* unit I provided my students an opportunity to own a unit of study.

## Future Directions

### **Implications in Teaching:**

Inquiring into the development of curriculum has provided me a rare opportunity to tailor a unit of instruction to the specific needs of the students in my classroom. I was able to investigate, explore, and experiment with a variety of teaching strategies in order to identify the best method to deliver instruction to the diversity of learners in my classroom. I have come to the conclusion that an inquiry approach to curriculum and instruction provides the most valuable opportunities for students to fully engage in their own learning, provide opportunities for students to direct instruction, and create meaningful understandings of key unit concepts. Inquiry provides students with the opportunities to investigate their own wonderings and construct their own investigations. It is through inquiry that students develop an understanding of what it means to be a life long learner.

I believe it is the responsibility of an educator to instill in students a love for learning, to empower students to take responsibility for their own learning, and to seek opportunities to grow and develop as a learner. And I believe that inquiry is a method for teachers to deliver this message to students. I intend on using inquiry as my soapbox for education. Inquiry inspires change. Through change, we learn of new things. Through change, we gain perspective. And through change, we progress. I want to progress as an educator; therefore, I intend to use inquiry in instruction and curriculum in the future. Through my inquiry into social studies education, I have learned that I have the power and ability to change curriculum for the better. I have created a unit that inspires ingenuity and critical thinking. Through the inquiry-based *American Album* unit, I have fostered a classroom environment that encourages student learning, sharing, and asking questions. This is the environment that I want to have in all my years of teaching.

**Further Wonderings:**

As I reflect on the process of developing and investigating my wonderings, I realized that although I have learned so much there is still so much more I want to learn. The following are my further wonderings:

- ❖ Can the spirit of inquiry be applied to any elementary subject matter?
- ❖ How often should curriculum be updated or revised?
- ❖ Could my inquiry-based American Album unit be used in other classrooms with the same rate of success?
- ❖ How much validity do my claims of relation to material and comprehension have?

It is difficult to know how validated my claims are into whether students related to the material more easily, created connections more easily, comprehended the material more easily, because I did not have the time to fully compare my class' learning to that of a class that was not using an inquiry approach to the unit. I conducted a pre-assessment and post-assessment of a cross-section of my students and a cross-section of students from another second grade classroom; however, my questions in the assessment were more of a check on content knowledge than they were a check on relation and comprehension of the material. Due to the nature of the pre and post assessment, I felt that the results were not a noteworthy method of data collection; therefore, I chose to omit the assessments.

- ❖ Do students prefer an inquiry-based style of instruction?
- ❖ What are second graders looking for in instruction, lessons, and content?
- ❖ Does inquiry incite student passions for subject matter?

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## **Appendix**

Appendix A	Pennsylvania State and SCASD district standards/objectives
Appendix B	Timeline of Unit Activities
Appendix C	Where in the USA is Gretzky clue sheet
Appendix D	State Fact Mobiles
Appendix E	Desert Shadows Package
Appendix F	American Album Lesson Plans
Appendix G	Letters from Desert Shadows Elementary School
Appendix H	Student Work: Name Suggestions, School Announcements
Appendix I	Student Work: Pennant Designs and Desert Shadows' Mascot
Appendix J	Student Work: Classroom Flag, Classroom Mascot
Appendix K	Student Work: Graphic Organizers
Appendix L	Student Work: Monument/Memorial Postcards
Appendix M	Mentor and PDA Lesson Observations