

Project Based Learning for Life Skill Building in 12<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Social Studies Classrooms: A Case Study

Daniele C. Zimmerman

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

School of Education and Counseling Psychology  
Dominican University of California  
San Rafael, CA  
June 2010

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family and friends for all their constant encouragement and understanding while I traveled on this journey seeking education, knowledge and discovering my dreams. I would also like to thank my professors and the faculty of Dominican University, as their support, guidance and consideration helped me achieve all of my goals and molded me into an educator who will not only work to make a difference, but will also care for my own students unconditionally. I finally would like to thank my colleagues for always helping me strive to be the best I could be and for always inspiring me as we all worked toward achieving our ultimate aspirations.

## Table of Contents

Title Page .....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Abstract.....	5
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	6
Statement of Problem .....	8
Purpose .....	9
Research Question.....	10
Theoretical Rationale .....	10
Assumptions .....	12
Background and Need .....	12
Chapter 2 Review of the Literature.....	15
Historical Context.....	15
Review of the Previous Literature.....	20
The Success of Project Based Learning.....	21
Skill Building for Life.....	24
Fundamental Changes to Education and Instruction .....	29
Summary .....	30
Statistics.....	31
Administrative Records .....	31
Special Collections .....	34
Summary .....	38
Chapter 3 Method .....	40
Description of Method.....	40
Sample and Site .....	40
Ethical Standards .....	41
Access and Permissions.....	41
Data Gathering Strategies.....	42
Analysis Approach .....	42
Chapter 4 Analysis .....	43

Interview Report #1 .....	43
Interview Report #2.....	49
Interview Report #3 (English teacher) .....	53
Observation Report (Classroom and Student Observations).....	58
 Chapter 5 Discussion .....	 66
Summary of Major Findings / Comparison of Findings with Existing Studies .....	66
Implications for Future Research .....	68
Overall Significance of Study / Conclusion.....	69
 References.....	 70

### Abstract

Based on the assumption that project based learning (PBL) in 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classrooms contributes to the development of life skills for high school seniors in this advanced and globalized time, this research will investigate student experiences with PBL methods for helping them acquire skills along with a case study of a successful PBL program.

The purpose of this study is to help educators discern the value of this instructional strategy. Constructivism refers to the concept that students learn through their experiences and curriculum designed around the Theory of Multiple Intelligences allows them the opportunity to learn through a variety of methods during each lesson.

A qualitative approach to gathering research, using the interview format was conducted with three teachers who agreed to participate in the study. These teachers had created a unique PBL program in their high school classrooms. The focus of their work was to document the success in teaching life skills to high school students with the goal of preparing them for college, jobs, and life after secondary education. I also gathered information by observing the teachers as they were involved in working actively with students using PBL.

The major themes found within the literature highlight the success of the project based learning method, the importance of skill building for life and that fundamental changes are needed for education and instruction.

I believe that I can conclude that from my reading, review, research, interviews and observations that the PBL method is successful in teaching and building life skills in high school social studies classrooms, and is able to better prepare students for life after secondary education. Thanks to this instructional method students are able to acquire skills that will help them achieve success in college, the work-force and in life.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

Today, high schools measure the success of their students by standardized test scores and how many are accepted into four year universities. Teachers teach to these standardized tests and students learn to prepare for and take them. Schools do not focus on what is imperative and essential for students in secondary education who are about to step out into the real world. Presently, it should be a fundamental part of education that students have the opportunity to develop important life skills that will help them become productive and successful members of society while in high school.

I have always dreamed of being a social studies teacher. Since my early days of playing “teacher”, I knew the classroom was where I belonged. As I grew up, not only did I admire the importance of social studies in our daily lives (such as being able to understand and relate to politics as well as personal social interactions, learning how to respect different opinions and cultures, and analyzing what is happening around us in our daily lives), but I saw that I wanted to make a change in how the curriculum was taught. No longer would a social studies class be taught only through reading the textbook, and completing the section review or glazing over a worksheet. Instead of being dependant on a lecture with notes, and later taking a multiple choice test to only forget everything learned the next day, social studies would be more of an active learning experience and a time for skill building through project based learning.

Project based learning in a social studies classroom provides a venue for teachers to use projects for skill building activities tied to a challenging socially minded curriculum, while allowing for students to experience their education in a variety of beneficial ways. It is impossible for students to build public speaking skills when they

are taking multiple choice tests. Students do not have to think critically and analyze a controversial topic when they are only asked to memorize basic details. For example, in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies required class American Government, students can experience our judicial system while working in groups during a Mock Court activity. During this project, students are asked to present and research landmark Supreme Court cases while acting as Supreme Court judges and attorneys. They research and write case briefs analyzing Constitutional Law, amendments and precedent cases. They work in groups to create and present oral arguments while forming and presenting their opinions. They learn to ask relevant and thought provoking questions. On the other hand, they could just read about the Supreme Court from the textbook, do the section review questions and take a test. From this one example of a PBL activity, one can see how students have the opportunity to enhance their learning and build skills in a different and more effective way. Students are working in groups, on self-directed projects, using creativity and thinking critically. The skills of research, public speaking and presentation are woven in as well. Students are not only learning the state standards and requirements for American Government, but their learning becomes more challenging, inspired, exciting, and real.

I researched a specific program created to prepare high school graduates with skill sets using the project based teaching method. I conducted an observational case study looking at how and why this PBL program was designed to incorporate skill building as well as their perceived successes. It is the purpose of this study to document PBL learning experiences into the high school social studies curriculum. The intent of this

work is to contribute to the research on PBL in order to influence educational reformers, administrators and teachers.

### Statement of Problem

An academically demanding and socially informative social studies curriculum in the high school setting is a fundamental ingredient for developing life skills in our students, especially graduating seniors in this technologically advanced and globalized world. Throughout my experience as a student, social studies courses that focused solely on memorization, bookwork, and traditional assessment provided a disservice by not providing me with the tools I needed to be successful after high school graduation. When I began college, I was not prepared with skills in basic academic areas. I struggled with speaking in front of the class, working in groups, understanding and creating critical analysis of readings as well as discussion and presentation preparation. I had never created a PowerPoint slide-show, given a formal speech or searched the academic research literature. If my teachers had focused on teaching these kinds of skills in my senior social studies classes, I would have been better prepared for my general education, lower division college courses.

There may have been a time when students could rely solely on their reading, writing and memorization skills in college and the job force, but if so, that time is the past. Today, students need more than just basic skills for basic jobs. Graduates today need to be able to think critically, creatively, and quickly. They need to be ready to work successfully in teams, collaborate, facilitate, speak publically, analyze, use reason, and learn to ask questions and figure out their own answers. These are the skills that teachers provide opportunity for students to develop through employing project based, cooperative

and hands-on techniques for learning. Today, there is, "... a general consensus among educators, business, and other interested parties that a significant gap exists between the knowledge and skills needed for success in life and the current state of education in primary and secondary education schools..." (Moylan, 2008, p. 1). Educators can fill that knowledge and skill gap with project based learning.

Difficulties in making instructional changes in high school classrooms are due to the short class periods, specialized teachers in certain subjects and that most schools are focused on preparing students for standardized testing. Teachers want to change instruction to project based approaches but cannot find the time and sometimes the resources. I believe that teachers and administrators should focus on implementing PBL in 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classes specifically because 12<sup>th</sup> graders are not required to take standardized state testing in American Government or Economics. Due to this, teachers have more freedom as to how they plan their curriculum with the state academic content standards. Also, 12<sup>th</sup> graders will be exercising their newly acquired skills right away, as opposed to learning skills during the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grades and having to wait years to put those skills into use. Finally, social studies curriculum provides many avenues for teachers to address social issues that students need to learn and understand in order to develop into informed citizens. I feel that project based learning as a way to teach in 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classes is not only the best option to teach the curriculum, it should be the only option based on what students need to be prepared for in order to be successful in today's world.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this research is to investigate how a unique program at a San Francisco Bay Area high school uses project based learning techniques and skill building

methods in their social studies curriculum to better prepare students for life after high school. The program focuses on building a foundation of real-world skills in students through asking them to research, write and create socially conscious documentary films. Through this research I hope to observe and better understand how this program was designed and created in order to meet students' needs for skills in this advanced time.

### Research Question

Through observations and teacher interviews, how does project based learning in high school senior social studies classes teach life skills to better prepare students for college, jobs, and life after high school? I observed a specific PBL program at a Bay Area high school to investigate what specific project based learning activities or lessons students are participating in their social studies classes which are preparing them for college or the job force. I documented skill building activities employed by the program and their perceived successes.

### Theoretical Rationale

Wurdinger and Rudolph (2009) described the constructivist approach to teaching by suggesting that individuals gain knowledge and create meaning through their experiences. The theory centers around the assumption that learners construct knowledge and meaning for themselves through actions and activities. People can personally and socially construct meaning through experiences instead of concentrating on remembering and trying to understand. Today, schools depend on testing and other traditional academic forms of assessment for skills that do not necessarily prepare students with what they need for success in the real world. Students are learning how to memorize and take multiple choice tests, and they are not being asked to think critically, analyze, ask

questions or prepare for life after high school. Endorsers of the PBL method for helping students acquire life skills through self-directed learning and hands on experiences, explained that today, "...schooling should be about more than academic skill development, and should focus on teaching important life skills such as creativity and problem solving that will help students become successful community members after they graduate from high school" (Wurdinger, 2009, p. 115). This concept relates to the Constructivist Theory as it is founded on the idea that students will better understand the world around them through learning actively, socially, physically, verbally, cooperatively and with enough time and motivation. The theory explains that learning by doing and therefore understanding creates a deeper awareness of the "real world". Project based learning is a specific method that provides such learning opportunities and also presents learning in multiple ways.

Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (2009) presents the notion that all students learn differently. For example, if a teacher is using only verbal lecture during a lesson, there will be students disadvantaged because they are visual or kinesthetic learners. Gardner's theory, "proposes seven primary forms [of learning]: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, intrapersonal (e.g., insight, meta-cognition) and interpersonal (e.g., social skills)" (Gardner, 2009, para. 1). His theory explains that when teaching, lessons should be designed around the multiple intelligences of the students. PBL is a planning method that allows teachers to create curriculum with students multiple intelligences and needs for learning in mind. Students need variety and freedom to learn, especially through ways that work best for them individually. Tom Corcoran and Megan Silander, supporters for needed improvement of

instructional practices in American schools, explain that, “Educators will have to vary the amount and nature of instruction to take account of students' differences in motivation, dispositions and aptitudes, experience, and instructional needs” (Corcoran, 2009, p. 18). With project based learning, students have the freedom and ability to learn through a variety of methods that will best address their specific learning needs.

### Assumptions

Assumptions of PBL include the following:

It is my belief that project based learning (PBL) provides an avenue for teachers and students to help develop a creative and supportive learning environment. PBL teaches students much needed life skills and prepares them to better collaborate with each other, learn how to work in team settings, and develop presentation, communication, analysis and reasoning skills. Traditional methods of teaching have become outdated and are no longer as effective in connecting with the current generation of students facing a complex world in which technology has become a staple of daily life. Finally, many administrators and teachers are focusing on standardized testing, and not finding time to implement project based learning techniques.

### Background and Need

Wagner (2008) recognized and described the achievement gap in our current education system. He suggested that PBL can help mend those issues. Wagner is a firm believer that schools and teachers need to focus their curriculum around critical thinking, problem solving and skill building instead of how to memorize facts for multiple choice tests. Wagner also affirms that there is a serious disconnect between what skills colleges

and employers are looking for and what schools are preparing their students with while in high school. As Wagner (2008) explained, “Our system of public education—our curricula, teaching methods, and the tests we require students to take—were created in a different century for the needs of another era. They are hopelessly outdated” (p. 9). Wagner further articulates that our world has changed and our schools have not. Our schools are not failing, they are just obsolete.

During my student teaching in 2009, I attended department and staff meetings that were promoting these changes in order to align with the times. Teachers and schools are looking to project collaboration, with hands-on and creative interdisciplinary assignments to lead the way for change. The teachers with whom I worked felt that PBL would enhance their curriculum to provide the students with the skills that they are required to have in order to be successful today.

My review of the literature identified the evaluation research on PBL. I found that the literature shows the success and benefits of PBL and opposes the benefits of PBL because it is a new method and difficult to implement in this time of standardized testing and No Child Left Behind legislation. My review also explored the different methods and models for PBL currently being used in classrooms, the insights from those educators using the techniques about the challenges as well as the worth and accomplishments of PBL programs. I documented the ways in which PBL can be easily implemented into social studies classrooms under the current standards-based restrictions that are present. My review of the literature synthesizes many of the current theories and studies about PBL and adds additional insights into this teaching method that could potentially change

the way social studies is taught and so that students' needs are better met in our technologically advanced and globalized time.

The program that I researched and observed is one that has implemented a unique and successful project based learning curriculum. At this San Francisco Bay Area high school, three teachers (one Social Studies, one Technology and one English) designed and created a program called AIM, or the Academy of Integrated Humanities and New Media. This two year program is for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and focuses on preparing students with skills that will help them succeed in college and in the work force. This interdisciplinary program works to blend the building of academics with professional and technical skills. One of the main projects of the program is that the student's research, write, create and edit their own socially conscious documentary films to present in an end of the year film festival. The three teachers have worked together to create a program using enhanced instructional methods that have connected and woven together common projects and curriculum which promote project based and skill building activities while preparing students for life after high school. I will research this program by conducting an observational case study along with administering interviews with the three teachers and program creators.

A majority of my research focused on providing administrator and teacher evaluations of PBL. While reviewing the literature, my objective was to look at how these theories connected to PBL methods, to research the success stories and benefits of PBL, to prove that PBL is a valuable method for teaching the essential skills for 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and finally looking for insights from educators using these methods and the worth and accomplishments of their program. I hope to contribute something new and

different to the resources that are already written in order to help further establish PBL as THE teaching method for today's 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classrooms.

## Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

The review of the literature on project based learning yielded results that I have arranged into three sub-categories. The first is titled *The Success of Project Based Learning*. In this section, the literature explains how the real-life, hands-on and practical skill building techniques found with the PBL teaching method are proven to prepare students with the much needed life skills required for success today. My second category is called *Skill Building for Life*, and the focus of this section is to show how students need more than the current standards based curriculum with dependence on texts and multiple choice tests in order to build essential life skills. The authors performed research in classrooms employing the project method in order to justify their claims that the current education system is lacking, and PBL methods are what is needed to mend a broken system. My third and final category is named *Fundamental Changes to Education and Instruction* and focuses on the instructional changes that the current U.S. education system and teachers need to make in order to revitalize their teaching practices so that students are prepared with what they need for success today. The overall theme throughout all of the literature is that project based learning techniques are in need of implementation in high school classrooms in order to prepare graduating students today with the skills they need to be successful post secondary education.

### Historical Context

Project based learning is an instructional method that allows students to build skills and acquire content through project based, cooperative and hands-on techniques for

learning. Many educational researchers and teachers believe that especially today in our more advanced time, the construction of knowledge is acquired best through interaction with a student's environment, alongside other students and through experiencing their learning as opposed to standards based methods. These concepts for learning are built on the foundational ideas of John Dewey's Constructivism, Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development and Lev Vygotsky Social Constructivism. Constructivism (Shulman, 2004, p. 294) is the idea of learning by doing while the Theory of Cognitive Development (Powell, 2004, p. 241) supports the idea that students acquire new knowledge best at certain stages and what works best for them individually. Social Constructivism (Powell, 2004, p. 241) explains that students learn best through social and cultural interactions. Project based learning is a popular and successful method for teaching and learning skills for life today, especially in 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classrooms. The theory's that the project based learning teaching technique is molded from come from decades of educational research and from learning about different educational methods through experience.

Dewey established his educational theory of Constructivism in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Dewey was a proponent for "learning by doing" and believed that experimental, hands-on and the actual experience of learning was more challenging, engaging and realistic. As Shulman and Wilson (2004) explained, "Dewey pioneered in the creation of the Department of Pedagogy, Philosophy and Psychology at the then-new University of Chicago in the late 1890's, he brought with him a radical conception of educational research. He introduced the concept of 'laboratory school' as part of a research university that contrasted the institution with the 'demonstrative schools' that

were prevalent among normal schools of the era” (Shulman, 2004, p. 294-295). Dewey designed laboratory experiments in medical school labs so that students could work with their hands and experience their learning through real-life projects. The roots of project based learning are in experimental education and are established in Dewey’s “laboratory school” research, educational philosophy and learning techniques which are still advancing and growing today.

Dewey’s Constructivism theory was established due to the fact that he thought that schools needed to reflect real life experiences and social opportunities for learning. He felt that students should learn with content designed around their interest in the activities. He also felt that if students had a say in their projects, their individual achievements would be more important and gratifying. These educational experiences would be “experimental and naturalistic... and should serve as a testing ground of the link between scientific and social innovation” (Shulman, 2004, p. 295). Dewey wanted learning to be realistic to life and more of a social activity. He wanted students to learn skills that would make them better citizens. Based on his theories and research, Dewey assisted in laying the foundation for the project based method of learning through experiences to acquire real life skills in order to help students extract more meaning from learning.

Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development is based on his physiological studies centered on the development of a person’s knowledge and intelligence. Piaget’s work throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century focused on cognitive stages of the brains developmental process showing when and how the brain best acquires certain forms of knowledge. As Powell and Kalina (2004) analyzed, “Piaget's theory of cognitive

development proposes that humans cannot be given information, which they immediately understand and use; instead, humans must construct their own knowledge” (Powell, 2004, p. 242). Piaget’s theory ties to that of Dewey’s Constructivism in that both explain that people construct knowledge on their own and through experiences. Piaget’s theory supports that of project based learning because students will be able to acquire knowledge as they experience it, by doing projects, group work and hands-on techniques which will help students construct knowledge. His work also explains at what stages students will best be able to build their knowledge. Piaget’s theory also, “...incorporates the importance of understanding what each individual needs to get knowledge and learn at his or her own pace” (Powell, 2004, p. 243). Project learning allows for students to work at their own pace and lets them decide the kind of work they want to do based on their own educational strengths. Piaget’s work transformed education in American and Europe to incorporate a better understanding for when and how students acquire knowledge and to build curriculum around that understanding of cognition.

Piaget's theory of cognitive development has its emphasis on the reasoning ability of individuals and how individuals themselves interpret knowledge. Powell and Kalina (2004) go on to further describe that Vygotsky, believed that there are actually variables such as social interaction, culture and language that affected how individuals learned knowledge (Powell, 2004, p. 246). Vygotsky worked from Piaget’s model and added to it his ideas that social interactions and cultural influences also affected the learning ability of students. He called this Social Constructivism and explained that, “Social constructivism will engage students in activities creating relationships that will directly affect what they learn” (Powell, 2004, p. 266). Project based learning blends both

Piaget's theory of individual knowledge acquisition with Vygotsky's model of social interactions and creates a teaching technique that helps students both individualize learning and collaborate while building skills and actually experiencing their education.

Project based learning is built upon the foundation of groundbreaking historical research in Constructivism and Cognitive Development. Dewey explained that students learn through their experiences and schools today should be using his research to plan their project based curriculum. Jean Piaget explained how and when student's best acquire knowledge individually so educators today can look to his research in order to plan lessons and learning experiences that are best for their students and their age groups. Vygotsky explained that students work best socially, and project based learning allows for students to collaborate and work in interdisciplinary environments. The restructuring of education in order to move away from standards based to project based learning educational experiences is what many administrators and educators believe is essential to prepare students for life after secondary education today. Teaching life skills while giving students engaging, motivating and challenging learning opportunities should be not only a method used daily but should also be understood as what students need to best build knowledge and be prepared to use it in our more advanced time. Teachers today are preparing global citizens to work in fields that expect and require more, and project based learning is built on these historical ideas that explain how to better prepare our students for what lies ahead of them in life both individually and socially.

## Review of the Previous Literature

William A. Moylan, an educational researcher and PBL proponent, whose writing explains his belief in there being a significant gap between the knowledge and skills of students graduating from high school today, explains that PBL is, “a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning essential knowledge and life-enhancing skills through an extended, student-influenced inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed projects and tasks....Project-based learning has been identified as a key methodology for closing this gap between current student learning and developing the necessary 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge and skills” (Moylan, 2008, p. 1).

Tom Corcoran and Megan Silander, two author’s whose writings focus on how American teachers today need to refocus their efforts on improving the effectiveness of their instructional practices explained, “The American high school is often characterized by reformers as a failing institution, a place in which teaching is teacher centered, boring, and impersonal, where students are expected to master a fragmented curriculum disconnected from the world outside the school, where too many students fail to graduate and many others graduate lacking skills essential for success in college or the workplace (Corcoran, 2009, p. 2). Students need a new set of skills to compete in the advancing workplace, and the U.S. education system is depriving them of those skills with standards based curriculum. It is time to recognize that the educational system is outdated and in need of structured improvement.

*The Success of Project Based Learning*

One of the major themes throughout a majority of the literature is that PBL enhances and encourages thinking skills, collaborative work, problem solving, critical thinking and analyzing, and preparation for life after high school. It is explained that the reason why high school social studies classrooms are best for implementing project based learning approaches is because teachers can use the curriculum to facilitate the skills needed to be active citizens. Ferretti and Okolo (1996) present numerous points as to why project based learning in social studies classrooms can be beneficial for students today as well as for students with learning disabilities. Students need to have deeper skill sets for their futures in college and the workplace due to our technologically advanced time and how the reliance on textbooks hinders students learning for the real-world. The authors make the assumption (through research of current school programs in special education classrooms), that in order to meet the needs of today's high school students and those with learning disabilities or special needs, alternative options for instruction, such as PBL are fundamental when providing and supporting more individualized learning opportunities.

Ferretti and Okolo (1996) worked to compile data from other researchers in order to present and support their own assumptions about the benefits of PBL and skill building learning techniques. Specifically, the research focused on what they found that supports the use of PBL for students in social studies classes and those with learning disabilities. What they were hoping to convey with the research is that presently students, for many reasons, need more options when learning, especially because all students learn and acquire knowledge differently and have individual learning needs. Their focus also relied

on examining how different kinds of multimedia and technology based projects further enhance the acquiring the skills for all different kinds of learners. They researched two 4<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms with both special and general education teachers to monitor their use of multimedia design group projects over a course of many weeks. The research monitored the students and their work within groups (collaborating), their discussions, their presentations and their level of creativity and skill acquisition. The students were asked to follow specific guidelines as provided by the researchers designed to build their groups cooperation and success while working together. The rationale behind the researchers work deals with investigating and incorporating the best ways for student engagement and group collaboration while learning and using technology along with Constructivist learning experiences. The overall article offers examples of how students benefited from the instructional method. For the most part, this article links directly into my own research as it explains, justifies and presents the benefits of PBL for all students and the need to teach them real-life problem solving, hands-on and practical life skills.

Researchers Wurdinger and Rudolph (2009) discuss that student success in high school is measured on the basis of test scores and how many students get admitted to four year universities. Some schools do not focus on what is also important, the development of important life skills that will create productive and successful members of society. Their article presents the concept that life skills, such as creativity, critical thinking and the ability to acquire information, are important factors in successful high school performance, not just students' ability to take tests. The authors promote the concept that enhancing learning in life skills can occur through the implementation of project based learning methods.

The article not only presents the author's research outcomes from the specific charter school but they also provide the reader with structured techniques on how teachers can design their own projects. The author's also present their finding about whether or not students were prepared for life after high school through surveys from alumni (and their parents) over the past 10 years. In the end, their research proved that the students at the charter school were better prepared for life after college because of the project based curriculum with a skill building emphasis. This article not only presents the concept that PBL methods are beneficial for life skill building, they also present actual evidence to support their assumptions.

The authors researched and featured in their article a specific charter high school in Minnesota that designs their curriculum around PBL with an emphasis on self-directed teaching. The school focuses on building general life skills for either college or the job world after high school, specifically through Constructivism learning methods. At this charter school students take control of their own learning. The projects that the students participate in and create aim at finding problems while creating and presenting solutions. As students participate in their projects, the learning becomes inspirational and exciting as students create, plan and build their own assignments to test against reality. Students create websites, build portfolios, perform experiments, create artwork, and build blueprints. The author's then performed a yearlong study of teacher acceptance and student engagement of PBL and skill building activities along with the distributing 147 online surveys to four groups consisting of alumni, students, teachers and parents in order to determine if their charter schools' PBL curriculum successfully taught life skills. The quantitative research survey specifically asked questions about how basic skills,

college/job skills, thinking skills and personal qualities were acquired and if those acquired skills helped them become successful after high school. This article and the author's research will serve as another example for me to reference regarding an actual study that has been done showing a school that has successfully implemented PBL with concrete outcomes and evidence of achievement. I hope to have similar conclusions when I begin my own field research.

### *Skill Building for Life*

Another common theme I found throughout much of the literature deals with the need to help students today build important life skills in order to help them succeed in our more advanced time. Johnson (2000) explains that schools and educators need to prepare students with more rigorous curriculum, implementing new and more demanding graduation requirements, and devise new standards and assessment outcomes. With these changes, graduating high school students will be more prepared to compete in the new more advanced and globalized world economy. Students need a new set of skills to compete in the advancing workplace, and the U.S. education system is depriving them of those skills with standards based curriculum. Students need to be better prepared with the skills of communication, problem solving, data analysis, fast paced decision making, cooperative team based assignments, and with using technology.

The article begins by referencing 1983's "A Nation at Risk," which prompted educational reforms in the U.S. education system so that our schools could catch up academically with other nations. The use of this primary source document presents how today we are still struggling to catch up with many other advanced and educated countries. This document and the evidence derived from it support the author's

assumption that changes still need to be made in order to prepare students with what is required to be successful presently and for the future.

Johnson (2000) started out by analyzing the Nation at Risk document and the organizations that have followed that document trying to improve and monitor student achievement. Based on the author's assumptions about skill building, they interviewed 389 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students at a primarily white school over the course of two days. They were hoping to document student perspectives about the relevance of school in terms of skill building and what they thought about their own futures and careers. The students were asked open ended interview questions about the themes of skills, knowledge and attitudes pertaining to school. They asked the students what their teachers taught them about skills, careers and career success along with the relevance and expectations of school for their future careers. The data collected was analyzed quantitatively. The conclusion was that the students did not see the connection between school and the essential skills they needed to learn and that would eventually help them in their futures. The teachers were implementing skill building through Constructivist learning but the students were not seeing, understanding or grasping the connections.

Johnson's study helped me formulate my own plan for organizing and collecting data. My plan is to survey students who had teachers who focused on teaching the essential skills for life after high school through project based learning. This article will be a resource for me to see how one group researched a similar topic, their methods as well as their outcomes.

Moylan (2008) presents a current dilemma that educators and employers are seeing, that is, there is a significant gap between the knowledge and skills in students

graduating from high school today and what they need to be successful in the work force. The article explains that project based learning is currently the best option for closing that gap and preparing students with the much needed skills to be successful in life after high school. The skills gained through PBL are communication, collaboration and leadership, cooperation, self-reliance, critical thinking, and creativity. Learning by experience or learning by doing is currently the best method that teachers should be using in their classrooms to help their students achieve these goals. These skills will help students to compete for jobs in today's more advanced and globalized world. The article explains that classrooms should no longer be centered on teacher's telling, but rather students doing. The article itself works to synthesize the information and educational research acquired by others to support their points about project based learning methods.

Specific programs are reviewed and explained to present some of the successful projects that are improving student learning and skills in science, engineering, technology and math. Moylan believes that team projects based on Social Constructivism will build the skills sets that students need and for which employers are looking. The author's analyze the findings in their research based on what they call the 7 C's, which are "1. Critical thinking and problem-solving; 2. Creativity and innovation; 3. Collaboration, teamwork and leadership; 4. Cross-cultural understanding; 5. Communications and information fluency; 6. Computing and Information & Communication Technology fluency; 7. Career and learning self-reliance" (Moylan, 2008, p. 1). Using these themes, the author's then examine Constructivism, Blooms Taxonomy and specific PBL projects and activities that have been created for a variety of core subjects.

Moylan explains that math and science classrooms are the best subjects for PBL because they will be more suitable for students interested in technology and engineering career paths. I think social studies is equally as important and although social studies is not presented as one of the examples, the article as a whole is beneficial to my research as it covers the same points as to why I think PBL is needed to ensure student success and ability to compete in today's society. I agree that currently, PBL is the method to be used in order to close the gap between knowledge and skills for our graduating students of tomorrow.

Wagner (2008) describes the issue of the growing gap in education today and the lack of the new survival skills that students need to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Teachers should teach their students these new skills so that they can achieve success in college and the workplace. Wagner believes that schools and teachers need to be focusing their curriculum around critical thinking and problem solving skill building instead of how to memorize facts for multiple choice tests. Depriving students today of these skills is preparing them to be disadvantaged to compete for jobs in our advanced global economy as well as how to be active citizens. The idea that basic skills are enough for basic jobs is disappearing. Wagner believes that there is a serious disconnect between what employers are looking for and what schools are providing (passive learning environments, uninspired lesson plans with the main focus on test prep and memorization). Schools and teachers need to focus their energies to figure out how to fill the growing gap.

Wagner proposes an overhauling of the educational system to teach and implement seven specific skills: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving; Collaboration

Across Networks and Leading by Influence; Agility and Adaptability; Initiative and Entrepreneurialism; Effective Oral and Written Communication; Assessing and Analyzing Information; Curiosity and Imagination (Wagner, 2008, p. 67). Wagner feels that these skills are the foundation for closing the achievement gap and I agree. His research inspires me as an educator and I believe that the skills he promotes will soon start becoming the basis for many changes in education.

The overall book is analyzing the current issues and gaps in education, while explaining the skills that need to be implemented and how to make these skills the foundation of education and curriculum. In order to write his book, Wagner used his years as a teacher and professor, his observations from schools, conversations and interviews with administrators, teachers, parents and students to support his research and conclusions. He also interviewed employers from many different companies to find out what they are looking for in today's employees and whether or not they are finding people with the skills needed to fill positions. His book provides the reader with transcripts of his interviews along with explanations and his own rationalizations about the issues and problems. His methods used are concrete as he ventured out to find what is being taught and if education is transferable to employment.

Some of the main ideas behind my research came from reading this book and realizing how schools have not changed but the world has. Wagner's book is one of my main resources as well as the instigator behind the drive I have for project based learning as a catalyst for change to promote skill building and more prepared students for our ever evolving times. The book is not only an important resource for my research it is also supports my own educational philosophy.

*Fundamental Changes to Education and Instruction*

A final theme found in the reviewed literature presents the concept that the majority of overall educational instructional strategies need to be updated, reevaluated and changed to align with the needs of students today. Corcoran and Silander (2009) discuss the concept that teachers today need to focus on improving the effectiveness of their instructional practices in order to help their students attain the higher academic achievement needed to compete in a world today that requires much more of graduating high school students. The authors research how schools are organized along with the effectiveness of instructional strategies based on their organization. They go on to explain that professional learning communities, department collaboration, teacher teaming, and interdisciplinary teaching tied instructional methods such as project based learning will further promote and ensure higher achievement.

Corcoran and Silander (2009) highlight a number of instructional strategies that can be used with core subjects, specifically mentioning project based learning as one of the most successful methods available. The article itself is a synthesis of informational research, findings, surveys, experiences as well as the author's reviews of different programs and organizations as opposed to a research study that was conducted in the field. The authors compiled information about instructional methods used as a majority of schools, their structures (such as whether or not a school employed interdisciplinary or PBL methods) and the student achievement based on those specific Constructivist structures and methods used. The article presents generalizations about what the current educational system seems to be lacking along with ways that will ensure improvement.

The article relates to my own topic as it talks about a need for a change with current instructional organization and practices, such as implementing project based learning assignments or interdisciplinary activities. My thesis is based on the concept that a change must be made in the current curriculum for 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classes in order to incorporate some much needed skill building opportunities for students so that they can better achieve success in college and the job force.

Throughout the literature, many common themes are prevalent. Students can no longer graduate from high school proficient in only reading, writing and math. Graduates need to be able to think critically, work in groups, collaborate, speak publicly, create, present and analyze. Project based learning is a successful and proven methods for achieving those skills for students. Also, the literature explains the reasons why these skills are now more in demand. Our world has changed as we have experienced technological advancement and globalization. Much more is being expected of students and employees, so high schools need to correct the discrepancies in the current education system. Fundamental changes to education and instruction must happen in order to catch up with the requirement of the times. Project based learning is the method that can help re-structure our education system so that students are prepared with the skills they need for success in today's world.

### Summary

During my review of the literature, many common themes arose, specifically topics pertaining to the success and implementation of project based learning, a popular teaching method. Many researchers and educators believe that PBL methods and activities is what students today need in their high school classrooms in order to better

prepare them for life after high school now that our world is more advanced. Colleges are asking more of their students and employers are expecting more of their employees.

### Statistics

While researching statistics from reliable print sources and academic and government agencies, a gap in the research has presented itself. Statistical data supporting the benefit and success of project based learning as an instructional strategy has yet to be extensively researched and recorded. Due to No Child Left Behind legislation and state standards and testing, PBL is still an up and coming teaching method that will require additional support and time to promote and prove its advantages. Many educators advocating for PBL are hoping data will become available so that many important and crucial changes in education will be made. PBL provides students with a way to experience education and build life skills, and curriculum needs to be adjusted to align with our students' 21<sup>st</sup> Century needs. Some of the statistical data that would be valuable to PBL research would include statistics regarding schools, programs or states utilizing PBL methods, proof showing increases in test score due to PBL, or the success rates of graduates in college and the work force thanks to PBL experiences. I hope that with my own research I can contribute useful and relevant information to shed light on this important and essential teaching and learning technique.

### Administrative Records

Many teachers, parents and community members hear about project based learning and think that doing projects is not a sufficient way to teach social studies content and required curriculum. Especially when today we have No Child Left Behind,

state testing and a reliance on standards, project learning tends not to be seen as a successful alternative teaching method but one as something that cannot possibly prepare students enough based on these requirements. Many do not know the definition or goals of PBL as an instructional method established to help teach, explain and present social studies content in a more realistic, engaging and constructive way. The PBL methods that I feel are essential, beneficial and necessary for teaching in today's 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classes follow strictly to the guidelines and frameworks established by the standards set forth by one's own state. What PBL proposes is that teachers take those standards and link them to skill building projects that promote opportunities and experiences for students to learn the content connected to skills that they will need in the year immediately following high school.

The high school social studies standards that I am investigating in relation to PBL have been established in the California Department of Education's History-Social Science Standards for Public Schools. As the CDE (2009) explains, these standards expect students to learn both historical and social science analysis skills. The standards expect teachers to instruct not only the content but to also demonstrate and teach students the skills of intellect, reasoning, reflection and research. When students complete their high school social studies classes, they are expected to have learned and become proficient in understanding chronological and spatial thinking and performing historical research based on evidence, point of view and historical interpretation.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> grade specifically, the American Government curriculum is focused around building a deeper understanding of our own governmental systems, our rights as citizens, and the history behind our government and its interpretations and processes.

Ideally, within this curriculum, teachers are preparing students to go out in the world, vote, and participate as informed citizens and adults. With the Economics curriculum, the standards expect teachers to help explain to students the economic systems and principles of our country and the world so they will have a better understanding of our global financial interconnectedness as well as how to function in society. In 12<sup>th</sup> grade, students do not participate in state testing, so teachers need to utilize the freedoms that they have when teaching these socially minded subjects. The standards themselves provide the guidelines for the content, but the teacher can design projects around those standards in order to better prepare students as informed citizens and for success in a world that expects much more of them.

Today, teachers need to merge their states' standards with PBL techniques in order to create a curriculum that prepares students with the skills needed success in college, the job force and for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As can be seen in California, 12<sup>th</sup> social studies teachers have less pressure and more freedom to teach their curriculum without state mandated testing, so they need to focus more on the skills building opportunities and experiences tied to the curriculum and not textbook readings and multiple choice testing. The standards ask teachers to prepare students with skills and the ability to be informed citizens, and students will learn those best by experiencing them and not reading someone's biased and boring textbook opinion. I plan to further investigate the programs, schools and states that are making these connections, changing their curriculum and procedures, and working to better prepare students while aligning with the state established content standards. Teachers today are doing their students a disservice by not employing PBL methods in their 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classrooms in order to

prepare them for life after high school. The standards lay the foundation for the content, and the teachers need to build and design the PBL activities and experiences that will best construct the skills and knowledge for their futures.

### Special Collections

The Buck Institute for Education's (BIE) headquarters is located in Northern California, but they provide teachers all over the nation and throughout the world with information, research and methods for understanding and implementing project based learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century classroom. The BIE was founded in 1987 and has since dedicated the last 23 years to experimenting with PBL techniques and strategies, and designing projects and curriculum in order to improve and transform the educational experiences of students. I discovered the BIE while student teaching at Tamalpais High School. The BIE designed numerous 12<sup>th</sup> grade specific PBL activities that are staples for Tamalpais High's social studies curriculum. Most if not all of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers use the BIE projects in their American Government and Economics classes in order to better prepare students for college and life after high school with the essential skills for success in today's world. I personally employed a variety of the BIE projects in my Economics class and I was amazed by the results that I saw in student engagement, enjoyment, understanding and accomplishment. The informative BIE website and their affordable PBL packages for purchase by teachers and schools are helping to enhance curriculum all over the world and bringing students up to speed with what has quickly become expected of them in this day and age; skills for life.

The BIE website is a resource for teachers who are looking to learn more about PBL, how to manage and implement the instructional strategy and find samples and

actual projects to execute. One of the main resources on the site is the *PBL Handbook* that the institute created as a guide for teachers. This handbook is said to be used by over 30,000 teachers in 49 states and 28 countries. Video tutorials and students testimonials are also presented as resources. The site also features the ability to browse PBL toolkits and find their sister website [www.PBL-online.org](http://www.PBL-online.org). The interactive sister site is linked to the BIE page to help teachers design, manage and improve PBL. Both sites help teachers learn how to successfully connect projects to state and content standards, manage successful activities and have access to numerous curriculum samples. The BIE specializes in PBL Economics and PBL Government. These unit packages are designed around national standards and have even praised by the U.S. Department of Education. These units are the main resource linked to my research on the BIE website.

The Project Based Economics activities created by the BIE are complete with seven curriculum units. Described on the site along with instructional materials available for purchase, the Project Based Economics materials are one of a kind. The units are designed to enhance 12th grade Economics content by presenting problems and scenarios for students to address. The goal was to create relevant, engaging and realistic economics driven activities. The projects are tied to Economics content standards and include key economic issues including that of scarcity, opportunity cost, supply and demand, micro and macro theories, free market, and fiscal and monetary policy. Each activity blends those key concepts into individual and collaborative scenarios. The BIE units provide directions, handouts, materials and assessments for teachers and students. In my own Economics class I used two of the BIE project, “The H.S. Food Court” and the “Presidents Dilemma”. In “The High School Food Court” the students were put into

groups and asked to come up with and design a new school food court. They were asked to calculate what would be best for student body profits along with keeping different interests of the many people involved in mind (i.e., community members, student's desires, school benefactors, etc.) The students were then asked to present a PowerPoint presentation to a panel of judges who took on the personas of different groups involved or affected. They had to mathematically calculate profits and opportunity costs along with presenting and articulating the reasons for their decisions while being grilled by five teachers. The "Presidents Dilemma" asked the students to come up with a solution for our current national economic crisis and present their plan for change to the President and his cabinet (who were played by a group of teachers). Both of these activities asked students to work in groups to research, design and present projects that were economically and socially relevant all while building skills.

The six Project Based Government curriculum units created by the BIE ask students to look at, learn and think deeply about our U.S. Government. The projects are designed to help students learn the inner workings of the Supreme Court, understand how to campaign for Congressional seats, debate either liberal or conservative issues, write a workable constitution for a pretend country, and facilitate local government policies. During my student observation semester I helped my master teacher as her class prepared the BIE's "Legislative Process of Lobbying" project. The students were asked to research a bill, form committees and actually learn the legislative process by pretending to move an issue of their own interest into a law. The assignment asks students to research current issues and events, work in groups, write and articulate a problem while forming a realistic solution and presenting it. This is just another example of a project

that links a relevant concept to academic content while blending skill development as designed by the BIE.

Finally, the site promotes a variety of professional development workshops, techniques and resources all available in numerous languages. Teachers working for and affiliated with the BIE hold seminars both nationally and internationally year-round. Currently there are BIE teachers and employees working with the Departments of Education in West Virginia and Ohio to completely re-design their state education curriculums around the PBL method. Internationally, the BIE representatives are working in Costa Rica, Singapore, South Africa and Central and South America to teach, present and implement the goals and methods of PBL. The BIE is striving to teach educators this effective instructional method while providing information, research, resources and materials for PBL and school reform. The BIE has worked for over two decades to build relevant and engaging content tied with building 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills in order to prepare students around the globe for success now and in the future.

The BIE site has been a resource for me while teaching and especially now as I research the benefits of PBL for 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classrooms. The research, resources and curriculum options help me as I look for what teachers and organization are doing to promote and implement PBL programs and methods. The curriculum units created and available on the site are fantastic resources for teachers who are looking for ways to create a classroom of engagement tied with today's real world skills and concepts within Economics and Government. I also discovered that the site provides extensive amounts of research done about the PBL method that I hope will help me further with my own research. The Buck Institute for Education is pioneering project based learning and

is an incredible asset to those hoping to enhance their curriculum, instructional methods and their students' experiences.

### Summary

As I have now completed Chapter 2, my next step in the following Chapters moves toward conducting research, analyzing my findings and formulating conclusions. The work I have done up to this point has prepared me for these integral next steps. During my review of previous literature I was able to discover three common and important themes within the available research. Those themes consist of looking at the success of PBL, methods of skill building for life, and the fundamental changes to education and instruction that are being currently discussed and debated. The work and findings of other inspired and excited PBL researchers helped not only guide me in my quest for information but led me to uncover an abundance of relevant and important information about the success of the PBL method.

I have also found there to be a gap in the research. As PBL methods and techniques are still up and coming in the realm of education, statistics supporting the method are currently unavailable. There are a few organizations and schools who have designed programs and implemented the techniques, but studies have yet to be conducted and yield viable research. I hope that my own research will help to fill this gap.

Further research into more specific areas pertaining to PBL research have helped guide me in the direction of those who have already started helping bring PBL related changes to classrooms and curriculum. My Administrative Records research proved that the California State Standards ask that teachers teach their students skills, and organizations like the Buck Institute for Education, my Special Collection, have designed

curriculum and guides to ease the process for teachers and administrators to employ these highly successful techniques. My next step is to prove that PBL in 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classes does in fact better prepare students for life after high school, and I am excited and ready to make that assumption more of a reality with my research. I will be conducting interviews with teachers as well as an observational case study to help me further discover if PBL methods are in fact as successful as the experts say they are in building and instilling life skills in today's 12<sup>th</sup> grade students.

## Chapter 3 Method

### Description of Method

The qualitative method is the approach that I used in developing interview and observation protocols to gather descriptive data on PBL. I interviewed the three teachers who created a unique PBL program as well as observed the program and its students as they designed and created their socially conscious documentary films. Over ten years ago these teachers set out to change the way curriculum was being taught and the experiences of high school students. Their program was designed to help students learn curriculum as well as prepare them with essential life skills. I hope to contribute to the information available on PBL programs with my three teacher interviews showcasing how they built their program, what makes it a success year after year, what methods they find are the most useful for skill building and their projections for the future. I also spent time observing their students as they worked in groups, researched, filmed, edited and presented their documentary films. From these interviews and observations I have synthesized the information into my report which will in turn contribute available information for PBL education.

### Sample and Site

My research was conducted at a small Bay Area high school in Northern California. The school's overall population is roughly 1,200 students. The Academy of Integrated Humanities and New Media (AIM) is the project based learning program which I observed. They have roughly 100 students in total in the program. For those 100 students, they meet two and a half days a week with only their AIM teachers, the three teachers that I interviewed. My sampling was purposive as my subjects were selected

because of their participation in the AIM program. My sample was that of convenience because I know the teachers who created the program when I worked at this school as a student teacher and I am familiar with the school.

### Ethical Standards

This study adheres to the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association in the protection of human subjects used in research. Additionally, I completed the Dominican University of California application for the Institutional Review Board for Protection of Human Subjects. The application was submitted to the program director for review and received approval.

### Access and Permissions

While student teaching at a Bay Area, Northern California high school, I met, worked with and observed a social studies teacher who inspired me in a variety of ways. This teacher helped create the AIM PBL program as well as was the main promoter of change in the social studies department to using primarily PBL curriculum for skill building. I knew immediately that her methods of teaching were the methods I hoped to someday employ within my own social studies classroom. I was also able to meet the other two teachers in the AIM program and I decided that I wanted to know more and understand their techniques for blending curriculum with skill building. Their program is one-of-a-kind and something I have yet to see at other schools or even while doing my research. I asked these teachers if they would be so kind as to answer some of my questions and allow me to observe their program and they were happy to oblige. All three of the AIM teachers are trying to not only promote PBL within the school but

within the overall system of public education. I knew that by speaking with them and learning more about their program it would be an exclusive and rewarding experience.

### Data Gathering Strategies

My research consisted of conducting interviews and observing the AIM program for my case study. I created interview questions for the three teachers which asked them about their PBL experiences, their reasons for promoting the method, the history behind the AIM program, why they felt their program is a success as well as their future goals. I also spent numerous hours observing their classes as their students met and worked on their documentary film group projects about social issues. I have written and prepared a narrative report presenting the findings and conclusions based on my interviews and observations.

### Analysis Approach

In order to analyze the three AIM teachers and their program, I interviewed them with structured yet open ended questions, as well as observed them teaching and employing the PBL techniques into their classroom curriculum. I also observed the students working in the classroom setting and viewed them practicing the PBL methods and life skills. From my interviews and observations I was able to write my case study analyzing whether or not the AIM PBL program is in fact a successful one in teaching life skills to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in their social studies classrooms.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

My analysis and case study of a project based learning technique began with interviewing the three teachers who created the unique Academy of Integrated Humanities and New Media (AIM) program. Ten years ago these teachers decided to make a change in how curriculum was being taught at their school to help underperforming students and today they have a successful program that has kids winning student Emmy awards, achieving acceptance to Ivy League universities and graduates actually prepared for life after high school. The programs' students graduate with firm understandings of relevant and essential skills that they currently need for college and the work-force as well as the ability to apply those skills into their day-to-day lives to achieve success.

## Interview Report #1

I sat down with a social studies teacher from a San Francisco Bay Area high school on February 23, 2010. She was a supportive colleague of mine when I student taught at this particular high school in 2009, and served as an inspiration to me. She holds National Board Certification as a social studies teacher. National Board Certified teachers are, “highly accomplished educators who meet high and rigorous standards... teachers who achieve National Board Certification have met rigorous standards through intensive study, expert evaluation, self-assessment and peer review... these teachers prepare America’s diverse student population with the skills it needs to compete in the 21st century workplace” (National Board for Profession Teaching Standards, 2010). She has influenced educators throughout her school district and beyond to implement project

based learning (PBL) into their curriculum. She also helped create and pioneer the unique and successful AIM program.

I selected this social studies teacher as my interviewee because of the PBL projects that I have observed her implementing with her students. Additionally, the AIM program was created around the PBL model of focusing to prepare students with the tools that will help them succeed in college and in the work force with a blending of academics with professional and technical skills. My conversation with her helped me better understand what experiences led her to believe in the PBL method and what successes she has seen over the years because of it.

I conducted the interview on the high school campus in which she works and in her classroom. I used my laptop for notes and a tape recorder to ensure nothing was missed. She signed the IRB consent form and we began going over the questions I had prepared in advance for this meeting. I have expressed my interest in PBL and the AIM program to her numerous times in the past and she was more than willing to share her stories and experiences to help me with my own teaching and research journey. As we went through the questions, she explained to me her knowledge pertaining to the PBL method, examples of successful techniques and projects, and the history and goals behind the AIM program.

I began the interview by asking her about what experiences led her to believe that PBL was an important method for teaching social studies curriculum. What she explained to me from the beginning and throughout the interview was that relevance is the key to successfully creating and implementing PBL in a social studies classroom. A PBL activity needs to be designed so that it sticks with the student's as a socially or

educationally relevant and significant assignment and experience. The activity also needs to be meaningful and will help students to begin to think beyond the classroom (understanding the bigger picture). PBL provides that relevance for students. The challenge for teachers is to come up with relevant and engaging activities that the students will relate to and grasp the social connections. The AIM program is a PBL program designed around making socially conscious short documentary films. The teachers found the engagement level to be off the charts with their specific PBL method. The students were engaged and actually cared about their learning and accomplishments. Their test scores were just as good if not better as well. The learning stuck with the students as they were looking at the larger themes of social studies and not just the names, dates and places.

A large part of PBL is focused on skill building, so I next asked her what skills she thought students most successfully acquire from the PBL instructional method and the skills she strives to teach while using this approach. She explained that when PBL is taught well the students can learn a vast range of academic and professional skills. She feels that the AIM program itself helps prepare students comparably if not better than that of an undergraduate college experience. The AIM program teaches students how to conduct actual research with not only books and articles but through interviewing experts and community members. They learn time management, how to work in group and how to manage group dynamics. The teachers help the students to know how to be successful in teams and groups without taking all the credit. They learn to negotiate, communicate and work with people who have different interests, backgrounds and schedules. They also use a wide variety of technology and media. Regular classrooms not using the PBL

method do not provide this level of skill building for their students. Teachers who implement PBL care about what the students do with the knowledge and how they retain it. She also explained the importance of perseverance and relentlessness. The students are forced to figure out how to get around a dead end and the importance of failing. She ended the answer to this question with explaining that today's parents do not allow their kids fail. She said students need to learn and understand how to fail, realizing that they learn best from those failures. Both failures and triumphs are achieved through more authentic life-like PBL experiences.

I next asked her if she felt that all social studies teachers should be employing PBL techniques in their classrooms. Her response was to different extents, yes. The main point of PBL is about relevance with the subject matter as well as with the building of skills. She explained that in her experience, many teachers think projects are separate from the content, but students are actually learning content through the projects. Many political issues arise for teachers who are pressured due to standards, NCLB and their school administration, but teachers need to learn the methods and observe those who have achieved success with the program.

Teachers who have experienced the success can prove the enjoyment and engagement of their students along with the skill building techniques of this enhanced instructional method. I also asked her if she believed that the overall system of education should be re-designing its curriculum to implement project based learning approaches in order to align itself with what colleges and employers are expecting of students today in our more advanced time. She said yes and that it is happening. She is on the board at the Buck Institute for Education and the organization is collecting data which has proven that

nationally and internationally these changes are taking place right now. She explained that the least amount of PBL is actually going on in California. The states that have been struggling economically are willing to try anything and are the most receptive to adopting PBL methods. California has been economically strong in the past and has not felt the need for anything educationally radical. We both feel this it is the time for something radical.

I next asked her to help explain to me how and why the AIM program was created and what has AIM been able to achieve since its creation. AIM again is a PBL program designed to build life skills in high school students through blending academics and technology. The students make socially conscious documentary films that are presented at an end of the year film festival. She began telling me the story about how AIM was officially created eight years ago after a year of experimenting with program ideas. At the time she was not yet officially part of the project but her husband was. A grant was given to the high school to help the underachieving students from a nearby city struggling with crime and poverty. They were not seeing success with traditional teaching methods, so they began experimenting with engagement methods blended with the use of technology. At the time that this grant was received computers in classrooms were still rare. The kids were always excited about using the rare technology so they came up with the idea of making their own movies. They decided to research and make films about problems in the feeder communities to the high school. The classes included students from all of these communities. The movies would blend their social studies and English curriculum with a contemporary problem or issue in their own communities. They had five computers for 80 kids and the students worked in groups of 15! After a year of hard

work, the students presented their work to the superintendent, administrators, teachers and the community. Everyone was impressed that 14 year olds were able to do what they did. The program creators were given the green light to institutionalize and create the program. At this time she came on as the head of social studies while her husband was the head of technology and another teacher heading the English portion. With a lack of models to look to they designed what would be the AIM program together. They conducted fund raisers for the equipment needed and were able to implement this unique PBL program. One of the key pieces is the yearly public exhibitions of the projects. They have entered the student films in to festivals and even the student Emmys and have received many awards. Students are now being accepted into colleges such as Brown, NYU and Stanford without taking AP courses but for being involved in the AIM program.

Finally I asked her to tell me what plans are in place for the future of AIM and PBL at her high school. She explained that they have always wanted to increase the relevance of the program by connecting to a University through a feeder or sister school program. They want to eventually collaborate with college professors and have students take classes and receive college credit while still in high school. They hope to build the program to an undergraduate or film school level. They hope to someday open it up for international collaboration and transcend borders. The trouble is finding the time and making the connections.

## Interview Report #2

I sat down with AIM's technology teacher and multimedia expert on April 30, 2010. I wanted to get a better understanding of the technological skills that the students in the PBL program acquire as well as his overall take on the method of teaching that he and his fellow AIM colleagues built into and promote with their program. Similar to my initial interview with the social studies teacher, I met this teacher in his classroom with my laptop, a notebook, consent forms and a list of questions. I asked similar questions to those that I asked the social studies teacher, but geared them away from being so social studies specific and more about PBL in general and their program. Although my thesis focuses on PBL in social studies classrooms (topics which were covered thoroughly in Interview Report #1) I felt it was important to interview all of the teachers who designed the program so that I could better understand their rationale behind creating and maintaining AIM as well as their experiences with PBL as a teaching method.

My interview began with a question about the experiences that led this technology teacher to believe that project based learning was an important method for teaching high school curriculum. He started by explaining that he himself always learned best by doing projects and more of a hands on learning approach as he always felt the most accomplished when working towards something tangible and with an end product. Working in teams, playing sports and just teamwork in general had always appealed to him so the PBL strategy just seemed right. He found that PBL engaged the students and his classroom management was much more under control. When he came to his current school, which was right around the time of the internet boom, it became clear to him that it was possible to integrate the use of technology to make an engaging PBL environment

and still meet the required academic content standards. He found with PBL learning became more individualized, the concepts he was teaching became more relatable and the students were learning life skills. With PBL curriculum teachers create the “need to know” factor which instills in students the sense of needing to know the material for more than just a test. PBL is about raising the level of concern as step one toward motivating students.

My next question asked this technology teacher about the skills that he thought most students successfully acquire from the project based learning instructional method and what skills he strives to teach through the PBL method. He explained that it first depends on the specific discipline which a person is teaching in but many skills, values and characteristics are emphasized throughout the PBL method. PBL asks students to acquire, demonstrate and present both the content standards and the skills that they have achieved and mastered. Students are learning to communicate effectively, manage impulsivities, think critically and solve problems individually and in groups. He also emphasized the importance of direct instruction first to help the students learn and eventually masters the PBL skills. You must first present, give examples and give them the tools and foundations that will help them achieve successful on a project. He explained that some of issues and criticism that teachers and administrators have about PBL is that they think it lacks direct instruction and therefore lacks rigor and relevance. He feels that this is not the case with PBL. Rigor and relevance in PBL units create real life connections and builds the skills that students will actually need and use. He explains that it is up to the individual teacher to address these issues and design the PBL projects so that the rigor and relevance is there within every unit, project and assignment.

My next question asked what he feels are some of the most successful project based learning activities that he currently teaches to his students. His explanation essentially described what they do in AIM to prepare students and what students actually do as they pitch, create, film and present their socially conscious documentary films. The teachers first help the students with selecting a topic that is consistent with the overall theme (and the 2010 theme is Change) and they make sure their topic is something that they care about or have a passion for. They then start the process of working together in groups, brainstorming, researching and putting together a presentation or pitch about their ideas to the teachers. The students start with their pitch to get the teachers feedback which they must take and apply. Much of the teacher feedback will come across as criticism and the students must learn how to take the criticism, learn from it, apply it and move forward. They students must film (and know how to use the technology), conduct interviews with real people (and know how to interview by formulating and asking good questions) and learn how to tell a story well. They need to be able to manipulate the technology so they can capture the interview effectively with the right lighting, exposure and camera angles. They put together their work in multiple cuts and presentations to the teachers for various sessions of feedback (which again can seem like criticism and the students tend to struggle with it). Along the way they are learning the skills of research, organization, group cooperation, presentation, interview, argument, creativity, critical thinking and how to effectively use technology. They are also learning about the theme itself. Their documentaries take what they have been learning in their classes and force them to put what they learned into practice and application. Skill building and higher

levels of thinking are designed into every aspect of what they do in AIM while using PBL.

## Interview Report #3 (English teacher)

In my final interview I sat down with the English teacher on May 5, 2010. Similar to my reasoning behind meeting with the technology teacher, I wanted to get a better understanding of the English skills that the students in the PBL program acquire as well as his overall take on the method of teaching that he and his fellow AIM colleagues built into and promote in AIM. I met this teacher in his classroom with my laptop, a notebook, consent forms and a list of questions. Again, my questions were similar to that of the other two teachers but geared more toward his personal experiences with the PBL method in general and their program.

My first question asked this English teacher about what experiences led him to believe that project based learning was an important method for teaching. He started out by explaining how when they started eight years with the freshman students and the PBL method he knew immediately that this instructional technique helped them create something special. Their students were able to make films and at the end of the year show those films to roughly 400 people on campus with such a huge student, parent, teacher, administrative and community response. He also explained how great it was to see the kids working for three months and learning so much in the process. The kids wanted the time to work in the morning, during their breaks and lunch and after school on their projects. The dedication and excitement of the students for them showed that these projects and the PBL format had a lot of benefits in regards to engagement, student interest, learning and skill building. They decided that a program that delivered the traditional curriculum along with the projects would be a successful and worthwhile path to follow. Eventually they created the program for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders by suggestion of

the district. He said though that they knew that the PBL method worked from their original group of 9<sup>th</sup> graders who were from tough cities and neighborhoods and many of them being students who struggled in traditional classrooms. The PBL program that they created proved to them that if the curriculum was good enough and projects that they created showed that kids who historically did not do well could in fact be successful they had something great on their hands.

I next asked him about what skills does he think most students successfully acquire from the project based learning instructional method. His response was that of course the kids learn the basic skills that PBL strives to provide students with but the kids must also learn a different approach to time management and organization which is incredibly important for their futures. With the films they must learn to balance school, life and creating these highly time consuming projects to knowing how to manage their use of time and to organize their lives in general. Those are important skills to be acquired and mastered. He also explained that they learn different ways to interface with adults that they would not learn in other classes. They will need interview, discussion and communication skills in the real world and the projects force students to go out into the community and talk with people, meet with and facilitate interviews. They are also forced to work in groups successfully which can be difficult at times. They kids must learn how to work through difficulties and obstacles to meet their end goals.

My next question focused around what he feels are some of the most successful project based learning activities that he currently teaches to his students. He started out by setting the record straight and stating that AIM is not a film program as the focus is not on film or film history. What AIM is all about is the skill building, writing, research

and the telling of stories that are informative and important. A lot of instruction and application is integrated by the teachers so that the students meet their goal of learning and the essential PBL skills. They created and designed this program in such a way that the learning is scaffolded and the students are ultimately taught how to do research and how to organize information all the while bringing all the skills together to make sense to tell and present their stories. They spend a year and follow a series of events and assignments that lead to the large final project which creates a substantial amount of learning along the way.

I next asked the English teacher if he believes that the overall system of education should be re-designing its curriculum to implement project based learning approaches in order to align itself with what colleges and employers are expecting of students today in our more advanced time. His answer was that he could easily say yes, but with that said PBL is not easy to integrate. Many teachers think PBL is just giving students projects and setting them free to do the work while they sit back and do nothing. This assumption is incorrect or the teachers that are doing it that way do not actually understand the PBL method. For teachers to do it and do it successfully they have to find a way to enjoy and understand that it does in fact involve more work for them usually than traditional teaching and planning. Teachers must design, organize and plan every step, requirement, assessment and end goal. They must use direct instruction and monitor that their projects are teaching the kids the content and the skills. A teacher employing the PBL methods must also be comfortable with lots of students just working on their own creating an environment where the students know they must get their work done. PBL requires a

very specific teaching style to make it work and not all teachers understand, have patience or are willing to put in the work to try it.

My final question for him was what plans do he and his AIM colleagues have for the future of AIM and the project based learning curriculum in their classes. He said that other than business as usual, they have not yet discussed any big changes. They are at the point where next year will be the 8<sup>th</sup> year with this specific structure of the program. At the same time though, the process of any program is that eventually everything needs an overhaul. There are no current plans to change anything, but there could be in the future. From his perspective there is ability to get complacent and lose ones edge. By not getting too comfortable they could take some time to explore and see if anything different is needed. They have thought about creating partnerships, bringing in experts and forming international connections, but those are just some of their ideas. He said thought that what happens in the day to day happening of being in a school makes these changes difficult, although someday they hope to be able to expand the program.

As each of the three teachers emphasized, the importance behind PBL is designing projects that are relevant, relatable, engaging and provide students with the important life skills and experiences that they cannot receive from standards based teaching alone. Each touched on the one of the main challenges today is convincing schools boards and parents that PBL is a meaningful and effective way to learn. There are also challenges with assessment, but all assessment has its challenges. With standards, testing and No Child Left Behind legislation, implementing projects to teach content can be extremely difficult, but all educators need to realize how the real world works, and multiple choice testing does not prepare students for life after high school.

Programs like AIM and teachers like these are rare and inspiring and prove that PBL can and will make a difference in the lives of students in preparation for what may lay ahead of them in our more advanced time.

## Observation Report (Classroom and Student Observations)

The second part of my analysis to accompany my teacher interviews is my report on classroom and student observations. My goal was to observe students as they pitched, filmed, created and presented their documentaries for their end of the year final culminating projects. This last project is what the entire year of learning, skill building, research and preparation prepares the students for; the AIM Film Festival. I wanted to be able to see the students take everything they had learned in regards to skills and put them into use to create their final exhibition of learning. Over the course of six weeks I was able to observe their pitches and presentations of ideas and research to the three teachers, their 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and final documentary cuts along with their ultimate film festival presentations. I was able to observe how the students worked in groups, researched, learned about and used advanced technology, analyzed, thought critically, created, presented and achieved. The PBL method is deeply ingrained into all aspects of the AIM program and I was able to see firsthand how AIM strives to prepare students for life after high school with the skills needed for success.

On my first day of observation I observed the students “pitching” their documentary ideas to the three teachers in an informal presentation. They are to have picked groups of four to five, done research following a structured outline and be ready to answer questions about how their topic relates to the theme of Change. The rubric asked them to: Give a detailed description of the topic (what is it – theme is Change); Explain the feasibility (can it be done); Explain why it is worth learning about (why is it important and why should people care); Describe the research thus far (what has been learning and what still needs to be learned); A basic structure of the film. The students

were required to come fully prepared to answer each of these questions as well as be ready to take feedback and direction from the teachers. Once each group presented they must take an hour long equipment test to prove they know how to properly use the technology. They then are allowed to go out into the community and begin their filming.

Each film is to be between five and ten minutes and must address the theme. Not all films will make it into the festival but all students have to create a film that not only showcases the skills they have acquired but shows something that they are interested in and passionate about. I saw students pitch ideas about a wide variety of topics focused around change. The first group that I observed pitched the idea of showing a dry potato farmer who grows for local Bay Area farmers markets. They were setting out to show how society has changed the way we grow food along with issues of sustainability and the environment. Another group pitched the idea of profiling a wrestler who performs in the East Bay Wrestling company. They wanted to show how society has changed to focus around and enjoy violence in entertainment. Another group wanted to focus on a man who was in to extreme sports, became paralyzed and overcame his injury to compete in and medal in the Para-Olympics. Each of these documentary ideas showed some aspect of change. The teachers went over the rubric at the end of the pitches to make sure each group was following along the lines of their theme and their goal for creating films that have relevance as well as some significance. The teachers gave feedback, discussed one-on-one with the groups and helped lead them toward certain directions but still left it up to the students to decide what they were going to do. The students are given the freedom to decide what they want to do tied to a general guideline. The students are given the opportunity to decide on their own how much time, work, and effort they will

put into the project. Their grades will reflect their work, but they are given the opportunity to figure out how to be successful or how to fail. It is up to them to do the work, take the feedback and create something great.

On the days that I interviewed the technology and English teachers I was able to observe the students working in the lab in groups at their computer stations. Each group had a station with two large screened Mac computers. I saw the students discussing, working with the film editing program, doing online research, creating story boards and asking the teachers questions for guidance and advice. The atmosphere is one of freedom but also one of hard work. The students are coming and going a lot because each of them is at a different place in their filming and research. In order for this kind of PBL method to work, the students must be allowed the time to create and have a lot of freedom. Many teachers outside of the program see this and think that the students are not working, possibly just sitting around, chatting or doing work from other classes. There are of course times when such things occur (as they would in any class) but these students know that what they are doing is hard work, time consuming and that their grades depend on the students getting the job done. The teachers establish an atmosphere in their classes where it is friendly and laid back, but hard work is happening and it is on the students to manage their time, efforts and responsibilities.

My next observation day was the day that students were presenting the 1<sup>st</sup> cuts of their films. They were to have two to three minutes worth of shooting to present. The students have had two weeks of time for research and film, and all groups must have something to present to the teachers. The format is three teachers in one classroom, one

group presenting at a time. The rest of the students are in the lab working on their films. A rubric is used to facilitate the discussion and feedback at the end.

The first group I saw presenting their 1<sup>st</sup> cuts was showcasing a facility for the elderly where poetry classes are taught. The story follows a teacher and a number of students who talk about the joys of their classes and the benefits of poetry expression for the elderly. The film was put together nicely and the teacher feedback talked about story structure, content and specific filming and lighting techniques. I was surprised to see how very technical the conversations were. The students have learned so much in regards to interviewing, framing of shots and the overall format of how to tell their stories visually through film in the best way possible. I was impressed by the way the students discussed and explained their ideas, plans and issues. From all of the films I observed that day I saw students who had gone out into the community, met with and interviewed people and compiled visual stories with a purpose.

A week later I went for my observation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> cuts. At this point the students were supposed to have what would essentially be their rough drafts with five minutes of film containing music and transitions, an intro, middle and conclusion. All of these pieces were required at this check-point. I saw a mixture of films, each at different stages and only one seemingly meeting the requirement. I saw a film about a Corvette collector and the film consisted of one interview, poor framing and lighting and sound issues. They teachers seemed to be confused on the relevance and how it related to the theme of change. The students needed to figure out what they were doing or change their topic because they were starting to run out of time. Another group did a beautiful film about hot air ballooning pilots in Napa. All the requirements were there and I was personally

amazing by the level of their work. I also saw a film where a group had pieced together the work of a cartoon/ animator and it was done well, but it was mostly the work of their interviewee and not of their own. The film seemed random and needed more visuals and shots about the subject of the interview and not just his work. Each group showed work of different levels in regards to what they had to show at this point but also of their acquired skills. I could see how some students seemed to know what they were doing from a technical standpoint while others were clearly still learning. It was helpful to see these 2<sup>nd</sup> cuts because I was not only seeing the process that the students were following to create their films but I was also seeing what level of work and the time it takes for these 17 and 18 year olds to accomplish their goals. These students had already acquired skills that many college students do not have and that to me showed that this program is accomplishing what they set out to do.

Later that same week I saw a second round of 2<sup>nd</sup> cuts and I was able to see some of the dangers of PBL. One group presented a wonderful story profiling an athlete competing in the Special Olympics. The general story was great and they had done well with editing, sound and effects, but the overall flow of the film was random and did not flow well. It was clear that in the group of five presenting, one girl had taken complete control. She would not allow for the other group members to talk and she argued with the teachers as they discussed the film and tried to provide feedback. Eventually this one student literally ran from the room in anger. Once the group had left the classroom the three teachers explained to me this is one of the dangers of doing group projects. It is clear that this one student had complete control and had disadvantaged the other group members.

The very next group that presenting showed yet another of the difficulties of PBL. The group was doing a profile on a tattoo artist. The first minute showed images and pictures along with music and an audio interview but once the first minute was over all the group had was another five minutes of the audio interview from the one man. We sat listening with no visuals at all and I could see the looks on the teachers' faces which consisted of disbelief, confusion and possibly even a little anger. Once the feedback began I knew how upset the teachers were. They explained to the group that this assignment is about filming something and they literally had no moving visuals or images. They had one uninteresting interview. After six weeks of work this was all they had to show and that reflects badly on not only them but on the program and the teachers. Another danger of PBL is the students who do not use the time, waste weeks and basically fail. I felt that the feedback was reasonable since the group literally had nothing and I found it interesting when the students tried to turn the situation around on the teachers. This group took advantage of the freedom that was given for the projects which is another issue that many teachers and administrators have with this teaching method.

During the week leading up to the film festival I saw numerous final cuts and kids explaining why they thought their film should be included in the festival. The festival shows 10 to 11 films maximum and the program has roughly 20 groups (40 seniors and 40 juniors). Many students will not see their films in the festival for a variety of reasons. Not only does it depend on how well the film was shot and put together but they must also have shown something about the theme of Change in order to be selected. Over the weeks that I observed I saw a lot of different films being pitched, presented and altered as each group hoped to make it in to the festival. Many films that I saw did not make that

final cut. A large part of the journey to making in films is getting ones work showcased for others. There were definitely many disappointed students, but the finished films that did make the cut were all very deserving, inspiring and fantastic.

In the past some of the AIM Film Festival themes were that of Power, Inspiration and the American Character. This year's theme of Change was highlighted by the students in a variety of ways. The films that I saw at the festival were those already mentioned from my observations along with some I had not seen. I saw the story of the elderly students and their poetry classes, the showcase of the Special Olympics athlete, the one about wrestling and the film about hot air balloon pilots. I also saw films about a retiring calligraphist, a trans-gendered man and a convicted felon and drug addict turned art gallery owner. Not one film showed a similar story or content nor were any of them filmed in the same style. Each group used different methods of telling stories and cinematography techniques which made each film completely unique. I walked away from the festival not only having enjoyed the films but having felt I learned about new people, places and things. These students were able to show skills, creativity, critical thinking, challenge and accomplishment using filmmaking.

One part of the AIM Film Festival included two students who spoke about their experiences in the program. One girl explained that she had been painfully shy as a freshman and sophomore and was terrified to join the AIM program which would call on her to work in groups and take on leadership roles. She talked about all the great things that the program had done for her on a personal level as well as how confident she now was with new skills. She said she felt ready to step out into the world next year (she was a senior) and put those skills into use and achieve success in college. Another student

explained that he joined AIM because he wanted to be challenged in his junior and senior year in a different way than just taking the usual AP courses. He said he never dreamed he would work as hard as he did and he is grateful for the AIM program as it prepared him for what he needed for life after high school.

Hearing what these students had to say only solidified for me what I thought AIM and the PBL method was able to do. These students confirmed how a program such as AIM not only allows for students to learn the required content differently but it also helps build within them skills that are important, usable, relatable and needed for success today.

### Chapter 5 Discussion

When I started my research almost a year ago, I was unsure of what I would find. I personally thought that the concept of learning through projects and actually experiencing education just made more sense in today's world as students need to be able to do much more than fill in bubbles and take multiple choice tests. I believe that education needs to adapt with the times and realize that students need the opportunities to acquire skills while in high school so that when they step out into the world they are prepared and able to achieve whatever successes they strive for. With the project based learning method I feel that students have opportunities for learning. I researched what others have found and written about in regards to PBL in social studies classrooms as well as all classrooms in general. I looked to the history and theoretical rationale behind this kind of teaching method to see what others have said about PBL. I spent time observing and understanding how a unique program at a Bay Area school works to prepare students with life skills while teaching the required standards and content. From what I have read, researched, written about and observed I genuinely believe that project based learning in high school social studies classrooms builds life skills in students and better prepares them for college, the work force and life.

#### Summary of Major Findings / Comparison of Findings with Existing Studies

My own educational philosophy is that students learn best by actually doing, achieving and creating something tangible, engaging and relatable. Students will walk away with more learning, understanding and enjoyment in American Government class when doing a Mock Trial simulation as opposed to reading a chapter, doing the section review and taking a multiple choice test. The theory of Constructivism explains that

students learn best and acquire the most knowledge through their own experiences. It is supported that cognitively, the brain best achieves in these kinds of learning circumstances. PBL provides these kinds of avenues for learning, so why is it so difficult to implement? My overall assumptions are the PBL creates not only a better learning environment but it allows for students to learn actual life skills that will be used by students and are needed today. Colleges and employers expect more today and education needs to be adapted and fundamentally changed so that the way we teach helps students receive the kind of education they need while in high school to be successful once they leave. The traditional methods of teaching are outdated and changes must be made so that students are no longer disadvantaged by standards based, NCLB and multiple choice dependent education.

My literature review focused around the success of PBL, skill building for life and the fundamental changes education and instruction needs so that the best changes are made for our students. My readings added to what I already assumed about the PBL method. However, my observations and interviews from PBL teachers through confirmed my original beliefs. The PBL method builds a variety of essential skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, presentation and facilitation. Programs like AIM highlight how students can work in groups, research, create, present and walk away with skills college students only dream of. Why not implement skills building activities when teaching curriculum? What stops teachers from taking the time and creating curriculum that is beneficial to their student's ability to learn and achieve success? I understand that testing and administrative regulations can make these transitions difficult, but in senior high school social studies classroom there is no state testing requirements to worry about.

Teachers have the freedom to use American Government and Economics classes to teach content as well as implement skill building opportunities. Teachers can and should take this year of student life and help build and mold them into informed and skilled citizens.

#### Implications for Future Research

I believe that within the next few years more and more schools will be implementing more PBL into the curriculum requirements. There are four Charter Schools in the Bay Area already that have designed their entire four years of high school teaching around projects and skill building. States throughout the country are seeing the benefits and altering their educational philosophies and requirements.

My research adds to other literature on PBL. I found research to confirm my assumptions, and also observed a program that is reaching and achieving these goals for their students. More students need opportunities to apply themselves and build skills after high school.

The PBL method in general lacks statistics to support its accomplishments. This is an area where future research and study is needed. School boards and administrators need numbers to understand academic success. PBL statistics on student success need to be assembled and reported. I also think that tool kits such as those created by The Buck Institute for Education need to be increasingly available for teachers hoping to implement PBL, because this method only works if it is carried out correctly. Projects are not just about giving students things to do and letting them do it. A lot of structure and direct instruction must be part of the overall design. I hope that once I start teaching I have the opportunity to implement projects on a unit if not a weekly or daily basis. I plan to give my students the content, knowledge, skills and opportunities to be prepared for life.

### Overall Significance of Study / Conclusion

I set out to prove that project based learning for skill building in high school social studies classrooms is a beneficial and essential ingredient for the success of today's students. I feel that from my research and from what I have written in this thesis, my review of the previous literature and the case study of interviews and observations the fact that PBL is a successful method for teaching is confirmed. I explained the history, rationale and documented benefits of the method. I highlighted literature and research of others who also have found PBL to be a success, benefit and need in education today. I interviewed teachers who have created a unique and successful program using PBL and I spent six weeks observing students use, learn from and achieve success with PBL.

Every instructional approach has its issues and struggles. If an educator plans, scaffolds and designs projects well, students will build skills and experience student success. I look forward to using what I have learned about the PBL technique in my own classroom as well using this research to contribute to this form of instruction that has the potential to change the way we teach and the way students learn.

References

- California Department of Education. (2009). *History-social science content standards for California public schools*. Retrieved February 28, 2010 from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf>
- Corcoran, T. & Silander, M. (2009). Instruction in high schools: The evidence and the challenge. *Future of Children*, 19(1), 157-183. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com>
- Ferretti, R. & Okolo, C. (1996). Authenticity in learning: Multimedia design projects in the social studies for students with disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29(5), 450. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com>
- Gardner, H. (n.d.). *Multiple intelligences*. Retrieved October 2, 2009, from <http://tip.psychology.org/gardner.html>
- Hein, G. E. (n.d.). *Constructivist learning theory*. Retrieved October 2, 2009, from <http://www.exploratorium.edu/ifi/resources/constructivistlearning.html>
- Johnson, L. (2000). The relevance of school to career: a study of student awareness. *Journal of Career Development*, 26(4), 263-276. Retrieved from <http://online.sagepub.com>
- National Board for Profession Teaching Standards (2010). *Better teaching, better learning, better schools*. Retrieved March 13, 2010 from <http://www.nbpts.org/>
- Moylan, W. (2008). Learning by project: developing essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skills using student team projects. *International Journal of Learning*, 15(9), 287-292. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com>

Powell, K. & Kalina, C. (2004). Cognitive and social constructivism: Developing tools for an effective classroom. *Florida Atlantic University, 130*(1), 241-249.

Shulman, L. S., & Wilson, S. M. (2004). *The wisdom of practice: Essays on teaching, learning, and learning to teach* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

The Buck Institute for Education. (2010). *The Buck institute for education: Project based learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Retrieved February 20, 2010 from <http://www.bie.org/>

Wagner, T. (2008). *The global achievement gap*. New York: Basic Books.

Wurdinger, S. & Rudolph, J. (2009). A different type of success: Teaching important life skills through project based learning. *Improving Schools, 12*(2), 115-129. Retrieved from <http://online.sagepub.com>