

ACTION INSPIRED LEARNING  
EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO MAKE HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

### ACTION INSPIRED LEARNING

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History contains many natural opportunities for educators to make connections to relevant topics within our world to engage students in authentic learning experiences. However, history education is facing a great deal of challenges ranging from compromised instructional minutes in elementary school, to a scarcity of authentic learning experiences, and to a lack of investment into the discipline. The 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed a decline in student achievement nationally in history-and civics-related content. Furthermore, over the past ten years there has been a sharp decline in students entering college deciding to major in history. As a history teacher, I have witnessed these challenges all too clearly in my classes and developed a pedagogy to inspire students to understand that they can learn about the past is so directly connected to the present, essentially that we learn about history so we can make history. I collaborated with my middle students to start an awareness campaign, which eventually led to the formation of a nonprofit organization, to focus on using education as a preventative measure to combat the global issue of human trafficking. The mission of the student-led organization was to educate young people about the risk factors and warning signs of human trafficking that could prevent a young person from becoming victimized by this crime. This research explores the impact of their history-inspired civic engagement as they moved beyond high school, suggesting ways to invigorate history education. I conducted interviews with the sixteen participants of Project Stay Gold to explore the learning

experiences of the students by analyzing how their work impacted their college decisions, career choices, and civic participation. Further analysis will discover how their experience can provide solutions to the current challenges facing history education by demonstrating what young people can accomplish once they are empowered by their learning to take action. The educational experience of these young people is described as Action Inspired Learning; a pedagogical approach that demonstrates the transformative power of education to motivate, empower, and inspire a generation of history-makers and world-changers.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the students who I have been so honored to teach; you have certainly taught me more than I have ever taught you.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

A1428	New Jersey Assembly Bill
AG	Attorney General
AIL	Action Inspired Learning
BTCTE	Breaking the Chain Through Education
C3	Framework for College, Career, and Civic Life
DOE	Department of Education
DMST	Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking
ELA	English Language Arts
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds ACT
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
HHS	Health & Human Services
IDM	Inquiry Design Model
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NCSS	National Council for the Social Studies
NJCAHT	New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking
PSG	Project Stay Gold
YPAR	Youth Participatory Action Research

## INTRODUCTION

As an educator I believe that students should discover purpose and find meaning in their educational experience. Discovering purpose and meaning first begins with understanding the why behind the lessons, content, and curriculum. Students often question and wonder, why am I learning this? As a history teacher, from day one I communicated the purpose of my classroom; we learn history to make history. History is a fascinating discipline, rich with inspiring stories of people and events that revolutionized the world and altered the course of humankind forever. Essentially, history itself is a universe wide, filled with thousands of blueprints of methods, strategies, and direction on how to make history. Deep within, I believe in Nelson Mandela's observation that, "education is the most powerful weapon to change the world."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I view my role as an educator as one who inspires young people to view themselves as history makers and world changers. Students will ultimately discover their purpose in learning history when are provided with an opportunity to make history.

In early October of my third year of teaching middle school U.S. History I made the connection between slavery in America's past with the global issue of modern-day slavery. After I shared a brief overview of the issue I was approached by a student who requested more information and expressed a desire to learn more. Following the weekend, the student approached me explaining how they spent time learning more about human trafficking. The brief conversation ended with the student stating, Mr. Papa, we

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson Mandela, "Lighting your way to a better future," speech presented at Launch of Mindset Network, University of the Witwatersrand Johannesburg, South Africa, July 16, 2003, *Nelson Mandela Foundation*, accessed March 20, 2022, [http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub\\_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS909](http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS909).

have to do something about this. Interestingly, when I first learned about the horrific scourge of human trafficking, I experienced an overwhelming sense that I had to do something as well. Learning should inspire the learner to do something with the new found understanding and newly acquired knowledge. What then is the purpose of receiving an education if the knowledge and skills remain internal? Education has the power to inspire every learner with the desire to do something great, to make a difference, and ultimately make history.

This student's belief that we had to do something about human trafficking, led to an awareness campaign and two dozen students joined the effort. Following months of research, the students spent two weeks raising awareness throughout our middle school as they created and displayed posters for the hallways, taught a lessons to their peers, and delivered morning announcements. Their excitement was contagious and they wanted to do more than a local awareness campaign limited in scope to just our school, these eighth grade students were determined to do their part in raising awareness about human trafficking in surrounding school districts and throughout the public sector. They named their campaign, Project Stay Gold; a student movement for the abolition of modern-day slavery. The origin of the name was taken from *The Outsiders*, a book they were reading in English language arts class.

Inspired by what they learned, the students took action. Within the first two years of Project Stay Gold, the students delivered presentations in front of government agencies, faith-based groups, local middle and high schools, colleges and universities, and many anti-trafficking events. The students launched a website to host and deliver their public service announcements as well as materials and resources they created. In

2013, Project Stay Gold became an official 501c3 nonprofit organization. Additionally, in 2013, the students launched Not on Our Turf, students for a traffick-free super bowl, to raise awareness about the prevalence of human trafficking surrounding the large event. The students had the distinct honor to collaborate with United States Senator Jeffrey Chiesa as well as the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking on the awareness campaign. After releasing four public service announcements, the students were featured on the front of nj.com, *The Daily Record* newspaper, and *The Star-Ledger* produced a full color story recognizing the students' efforts. From the inception of Project Stay Gold, the students were determined to bring awareness of human trafficking to schools throughout the state of New Jersey. In July 2019, with a stroke of a pen, their dreams became a reality as Governor Phil Murphy signed Assembly bill A1428 into law. This provision required the New Jersey Department of Education to create and distribute comprehensive guidelines on the prevention of human trafficking to schools throughout the state. Released in January 2022, the Guidelines for Schools on the Prevention of Human Trafficking of Students featured Project Stay Gold as an exemplar for student-led groups to follow.

As the facilitator of Project Stay Gold, I watched the students change and grow but I also want to know how this uniquely authentic learning experience impacted the student's lives beyond middle school and in particular their college decisions, career choices, and civic participation. In this dissertation, I explore what motivated these young people to actively engage the issue of human trafficking and assess the learning outcomes that resulted from their experience through a series of interviews with these students. I want to understand how their project can be reproduced by other students and teachers

who seek to connect their learning experience with making a difference in their community. The Action Inspired Learning experience of Project Stay Gold may reveal practical solutions to the current challenges within history education regarding limits on instructional time, a scarcity of experiential learning, and a lack of investment in history education

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **CHALLENGES WITHIN SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION**

History provides a framework for activism and reform; therefore, the most effective measure of education are the manifested actions of an empowered student engaging in an authentic learning experience. Simply stated, I believe we learn history to make history. The purpose of this study is to explore the dynamic differences young people can make when they are inspired and empowered by their educational experiences, specifically history. This research explores the impact of Action Inspired Learning and the qualities of experiential learning within history education when students are challenged to do something impactful with the knowledge they have acquired as they learn from the past. The standard delivery of history education in K-12 classrooms begs the question: Why do we learn history? The most common academic responses consist of: to learn from the past by not repeating the same mistakes, to be a more informed citizenry, and to possess a deeper appreciation for those who have gone before us and value what they have established. The more important question is: How can educators genuinely empower students through their understanding of the past to take action in a meaningful way that leaves a positive impact on society?

To begin to answer these questions I investigated an authentic example of Action Inspired Learning that organically grew out of my own classroom, Project Stay Gold.<sup>1</sup> I interviewed former students who actively participated in the student-led middle and high school program. The students of Project Stay Gold developed a unique passion to prevent

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<sup>1</sup> IRB approved June 30, 2021.

human trafficking as they actively engaged the issue. They proposed bold solutions, created public service announcements, traveled throughout New Jersey giving presentations, and ultimately demonstrated how the power of education can be used as a successful preventative strategy. The objective for the interviews was to determine how students' educational experiences in middle and high school shaped, influenced, and impacted their college experiences, career decisions, as well as their civic participation as adults. The participants are now college graduates, working in careers, and starting families. This research will provide evidence as well as documentation of the enduring nature of Action Inspired Learning when students are empowered to solve problems, propose solutions, and make a difference in the world around them.

In this dissertation I explore the transformational power of education to inspire and empower students to engage human rights causes and global issues as well as the lasting impact they can establish. Through the application of lessons learned from history, young people are provided with blueprints to affect change in their community. The students of Project Stay Gold demonstrated how change can be accomplished through the amplification of their voices, active participation in a cause to establish sustainable momentum, and advocating for effective solutions to current global issues. It is imperative for students to learn inside of a classroom environment that fosters passion, empathy, and agency with the ultimate objective of empowering young people to make history. To understand the context for this study, it is important to examine the current state of social studies education and the challenges that obstruct projects such as Action Inspired Learning experiences.

Gallup conducted a survey in 2013 of close to 500,000 students from 1,700 different school districts across the country to measure student engagement. Their research found that eight out of ten elementary students are engaged with school.<sup>2</sup> However, the survey found that only six out of ten middle school students and four out of ten high school students are engaged with school.<sup>3</sup> A follow-up Gallup Student Poll revealed that forty-five percent of all students identify themselves as not engaged or actively disengaged with school.<sup>4</sup> This may in part be explained by dominant history pedagogy. In 2018, Professor of History and author James Loewen stated, “Research shows that students spend more class time with their textbooks in history-reading the books in class, discussing them, answering the 60 questions at the end of each chapter- than in any other subject in the curriculum.”<sup>5</sup> At the conclusion of a school year, a student may learn a large number of facts about people, places, and events; however, what are they doing with the knowledge they have gained? After learning about the history-makers and world-changers in a history course, are students motivated to follow the examples outlined in the roadmap of history? Indicators such as declining student performance on history related assessments, polls revealing the deep political divide within the nation, dwindling enrollments in history-related majors in colleges, and a general resistance to

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<sup>2</sup> Brandon Busteed, "The School Cliff: Student Engagement Drops With Each School Year," *Gallup* (blog), entry posted January 7, 2013, accessed February 9, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/170525/school-cliff-student-engagement-drops-school-year.asp>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Shane J. Lopez, "What Students Need to Be Engaged," *Gallup* (blog), entry posted April 9, 2014, accessed February 9, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/173612/students-need-engaged.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> James W. Loewen, *Teaching What Really Happened*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2018), 10.



social change clearly demonstrate that social studies education is far more relevant and essential than it has been in prior years.

Disciplines such as history and civics education provide an archetype for activism and reform which is deeply ingrained throughout the context of the content. When students are inspired by their educational experience, empowered to actively participate, and challenged to make history, learning is awakened and energized within them. Therefore, the delivery of the instruction and the promotion of the subject must be reformed and reimagined to inspire young people to be history-makers and world-changers in their own rights. History education provides a blueprint for young people to follow as they construct their own framework to make a real and substantive difference in the world around them.

### **CHALLENGE #1: COMPROMISED INSTRUCTIONAL TIME IN PRIMARY GRADES**

The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2002, *Race to the Top* initiative of 2010, and the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) of 2015 are all federal legislative mandates imposed on states requiring standardized tests to be administered every school year at the state level. Since school districts were assessed and judged by their students' performance on the high-stakes assessments, schools quickly adapted to redefine their instructional approach and practice to focus their time, attention, and resources on reading, writing, and math. This is especially true at the primary level in grades where the large majority of instructional time is dedicated to increasing math and English language arts (ELA) scores on standardized tests. According to the Schools and Staffing Survey of 2011, "third graders in American schools spent less than 10 percent of their academic week learning social studies. By the end of eighth grade, students spent only 4.2 hours

per week in a history or social studies class - as compared to 6.5 hours in English or language arts, 5 hours in math, and 4.3 hours in science.”<sup>6</sup> This study found a compromise in social studies instructional time from early primary grades through middle school. For example, in the school district in which I am employed, grades K-2 students receive 720 minutes of ELA instruction and 350 minutes of math weekly, while grades 3-5 students receive 600 or more minutes of ELA instruction and 350 minutes of math instruction per week. On average students receive just about 100 minutes of social studies instruction a week; comparatively, students in grades 3-5 receive 500-600 more minutes of ELA and 250 more minutes of math per week.<sup>7</sup>

	<b>K</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Balanced Literacy Program</b>	720	720	720	625	600	600
<b>Mathematics</b>	350	350	350	350	350	350
<b>Science</b>	90	90	90	120	120	120
<b>Social Studies</b>	90	90	90	120	120	120

Figure 1 | Weekly teaching minutes in grade K-5<sup>8</sup>

Simply, social studies is often perceived by educators and students alike as less important since it is not a tested subject and does not require a high-stakes assessment placing an emphasis on the relevance or importance of the discipline's content and skills.

The anecdotal time restrictions on social studies instruction mentioned above are corroborated by a study completed by Lisa D’Souza at Assumption University. Her

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<sup>6</sup> Samantha Stearns, "'What Changed' In Social Studies Education: A View from the Classroom," *Perspectives on History* (blog), accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/summer-2019/what-changed-in-social-studies-education>.

<sup>7</sup> Jefferson Township Public Schools, "Weekly Elementary Instructional Minutes," last modified August 25, 2017, Google Document.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

students include eight third grade teachers from different school districts throughout Massachusetts. All eight teachers highlighted the reduction in social studies instructional time inside of their classrooms and believed it was connected to the high-stakes, standardized assessments. The 2018 study revealed, “All eight of the teachers reinforced how their ELA and math blocks were equal or greater than 60 minutes five days a week. In all cases, social studies blocks were, at most, 45 minutes, 2.5 days a week. For example, Alice described her schedule as including ELA and math for an hour, five days a week, and then a special block for science and social studies for 45 minutes twice a week.”<sup>9</sup> This study demonstrates another problematic aspect of K-5 social studies education, being the constant competition with science for instructional minutes. Some teachers elect to alternate the science and social studies units of the curriculum, which could potentially further compromise the authenticity of social studies instruction in an elementary learning environment.

To abbreviate the amount of time children are educated in history, civics, economics, and geography in grades K-6 jeopardizes their formative years by undermining the foundational understanding of their society, government, and the distinct role they play as citizens. In 2018, Gaudelli and Laverty argued, “Social studies as a K-12 subject area is in retreat from what was arguably an already diminished position vis-à-vis literacy and numeracy among policy makers and the general public. The fracturing and fragmentation of the field can only contribute to its further diminution when there is an existential question about what exactly the field provides young people and society.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lisa D'Souza and Meagan Kullberg, "Developing Future Citizens of America: Repositioning Social Studies Education in an Era of Accountability," *Social Studies Education Review* 7, no. 2 (2018): 8.

<sup>10</sup> William Gaudelli and Megan J. Laverty, "Reconstruction of Social Studies," *Education and Culture* 34, no. 1 (2018): 18.

Acknowledging the absence of social studies in federal education policy, the 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education argue that, “Seen through the lens of accountability policy, civics and related social sciences have become second-tier academic subjects.”<sup>11</sup> The report cites a national survey which revealed, “44 percent of school districts reported reductions in instructional time on non-tested subjects in elementary grades, including social studies, in the years following the implementation of NCLB.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, teachers utilize the minimal instructional time to focus on the facts and dates surrounding historical events and less time is devoted to authentic and engaging lesson activities.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, the decreased emphasis on social studies content in elementary school sends a loud and clear message to students that civics and history are not nearly as important as English language arts or mathematics.

Twenty years removed from the implementation of NCLB, evidence of deficiencies in social studies education can be seen among young adults pursuing careers as teachers of social studies. In her article “How Social Studies Can Help Young Kids Make Sense of the World,” Sarah Gosner quoted Ann Duque, a former elementary school teacher; she revealed:

‘I’m finding that children don’t fully understand what’s happening in the world; they’re not given the time or space to process what’s happening because a) no one’s talking about it, and b) no one’s helping them connect what’s happening today to the systems and patterns of the past,’ said Duque. ‘So now I’m seeing student teachers, products of No Child Left Behind, who never experienced rigorous social studies in their schooling either, so they don’t even know how to

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Hansen et al., *2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: Understanding the social studies teacher workforce*, Brookings Institute (June 27, 2018), 2, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/2018-brown-center-report-on-american-education-understanding-the-social-studies-teacher-workforce/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

teach it. When I ask them to take part in inquiry, research or exploration, they don't know how to do that.'<sup>14</sup>

This inability to understand how to process and explain the complexity of the world around them contributes to an uninformed, disengaged, and apathetic citizenry. As the nation has become increasingly partisan and divided over race, gender, and socio-economic issues, there is a desperate need for social studies education to equip children with the knowledge and skills to become more informed citizens prepared to make positive and impactful contributions to society. This begins by emphasizing the importance of social studies in K-5 education and prioritizing instructional time to effectively provide students with the fortitude, proficiencies, and empathy desperately needed to rise to the challenges of the 21st century.

## **CHALLENGE # 2: SCARCITY OF AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

A scarcity of authentic learning experiences within many history classrooms is the second considerable challenge facing students. In his Edvocate article, "Philosophies of Education: 2 Types of Teacher-Centered Philosophies," Matthew Lynch defined Educational Essentialism as, "the educational philosophy of teaching basic skills. This philosophy stresses core knowledge in reading, writing, math, science, history, foreign language, and technology. The tools include lecturing, memorization, repetition, practice, and assessment."<sup>15</sup> Influenced by the Essentialism philosophy, many state standards place a heavy emphasis on historical content which directly creates mandates on teachers to

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Gosner, "How social studies can help young kids make sense of the world," The Hechinger Report, last modified July 12, 2018, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://hechingerreport.org/how-social-studies-can-help-young-kids-make-sense-of-the-world/>.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Lynch, "Philosophies of Education: 2 Types of Teacher-Centered Philosophies," *The Edvocate*, August 6, 2016, 1, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://www.theedadvocate.org/philosophies-education-2-types-teacher-centered-philosophies/>.

cover an enormous amount of content in a finite amount of time. To meet this challenge, history teachers conform to an Essentialist philosophy for teaching and learning within their social studies courses, resorting to the textbook-centered or lecture-based approach observed by Loewen. This produces a classroom where the teacher showcases all of the knowledge they have about history, and the students simply listen as passive and compliant learners. Edupedia describes the common model of essentialist teaching in US public schools:

A typical day at an essentialist school might have seven periods, with students attending a different class each period. The teachers impart knowledge mainly through conducting lectures, during which students are expected to take notes. The students are provided with practice worksheets or hands-on projects, followed by an assessment of the learning material covered during this process. The students continue with the same daily schedule for a semester or a year.<sup>16</sup>

A history classroom constructed within the Essentialism framework reduces students to containers of information; the only time they are called upon to demonstrate achievement or progress is when they are required to complete an end of a unit assessment. Furthermore, the assessments are designed to reinforce the memorization of facts, dates, people, places, and events. Matthew Lynch wrote, “William C. Bagley was one of the most influential advocates of essentialism. Bagley believed that education was not supposed to change society but to preserve it. At a conference for the American Association of School Administrators in 1938, Bagley ‘urged schools and educators to create what we know today to be vigilant in sticking to the core curriculum’.”<sup>17</sup> In a teacher-centered classroom it is difficult for students to discover inspiration or feel empowered in a classroom environment where Essentialism defines the framework of

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<sup>16</sup> Edupedia, "What is Essentialism?," Edupedia, last modified June 10, 2018, accessed March 13, 2021, <https://www.theedadvocate.org/edupedia/content/what-is-essentialism/>.

<sup>17</sup> Lynch, "Philosophies of Education," 1.

teaching and learning, for they are solely containers and compliant receivers of information.

The 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Report Card demonstrated the scarcity of authentic learning experiences in many American schools, revealing the outcome of Essentialist teaching as evidenced in the student participant responses to survey questions during the assessment. The 2018 report found, “Eighth-grade students were asked how frequently they participated in U.S. history-related practices when studying this subject during the current school year. The response categories for these survey questions are never or hardly ever, once in a while, sometimes, often, and always or almost always.”<sup>18</sup> The survey responses demonstrated the linkage between students who always or almost always participate in history-related practices and the high percentile of performance. Furthermore, the survey results demonstrated the linkage between students who respond sometimes or often participate in history-related practices and the low percentile of performance. History related-practices are defined as examining the causes and effects of important events in U.S. history, analyzing the relationship between two historical events, and comparing and evaluating different points of view about the past.<sup>19</sup> Each skill set questioned here defines authentic history-related experiences in which most students miss out on in an Essentialism classroom where lecture dominates student learning.

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<sup>18</sup> Department of Education, *NAEP Report Card: U.S. History*, 2019, accessed March 13, 2021, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ushistory/survey-questionnaires/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

## THE EFFECT

The NAEP assessment also provided indicators of student achievement which span across state borders to identify achievement gaps on a national level. The NAEP assessment represents the only standardized test that measures student achievement in the disciplines of history and civics. Going beyond the typical standardized test, the NAEP assessment surveys the participants by asking questions about the content, which provides valuable data that connect the responses with performance on the test. Furthermore, it is critical for a national assessment to produce a big picture view of America's students as the data informs the nation of the areas identified as strengths and weaknesses within the content area.

The results of the 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) of 8th grade assessment of civics, geography, and history demonstrates the current challenges of social studies education in the United States. The assessment results in geography reveal a sharp decline of 3 points below the national average on the 2014 NAEP assessment leading to a decrease of 2 points below the baseline score of 260.<sup>20</sup> In comparison to the 2014 results in United States History, the national average score dropped from 267 to 263. Even though the average score is three points above the baseline, the four-point decline from 2014 raises questions and concerns about history instruction across the nation. Finally, the civics assessments revealed no significant change from the 2014 assessment.<sup>21</sup> Of particular concern is the fact that the assessment results identified achievement gaps for white, black, and Hispanic students across the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



nation in geography and U.S. History. In a statement released by the National Council for the Social Studies, President Tina Heafner (2018) wrote, “Social studies instructional time, course requirements, and resources have been gradually declining since the standardization movement and the subject’s value diminished with each educational policy initiative that pushed civics, history, and geography out of the K-8 curriculum.”<sup>22</sup> In a subject that is designed specifically to analyze the past to avoid making similar mistakes, the trend of history education in America’s schools is fixed on doing the same thing over and over again while avoiding strategic improvements to the discipline.

The NAEP report also states, “in history, students scored lower on all four areas measured by the test—the evolution of American democracy; culture; economic and technical changes; and America’s changing role in the world. The poor results were consistent across all racial and ethnic categories too, with the exception of students identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander.”<sup>23</sup> The assessment reveals that in 2018 a quarter of student performance dropped below the basic category and thirty-four percent of students fell below the basic performance category in history compared to twenty-nine percent in 2014.<sup>24</sup> In response to the NEAP assessment results, Tina Heafner wrote, “she was dismayed by the first decline in U.S. history and geography achievement in middle school. ‘One factor that also is really disturbing for me is just the general low level of proficiency: Less than a quarter of our students are proficient or above proficient level in

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<sup>22</sup> National Council for the Social Studies, "NCSS Response to the NAEP 2018 Grade 8 Assessment Results," National Council for the Social Studies, last modified April 2020, accessed June 25, 2020, <https://www.socialstudies.org/about/ncss-response-naep-2018-grade-8-assessment-results>.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Sawchuk and Sarah D. Sparks, "8th Graders Don't Know Much About History, National Exam Shows," *Education Week*, April 23, 2020, accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/8th-graders-dont-know-much-about-history-national-exam-shows/2020/04>.

<sup>24</sup> Sawchuk and Sparks, "8th Graders,".

the three subject areas, and we're talking only 15 percent in U.S. history.'"<sup>25</sup> The NAEP assessment results have garnered the attention of educators and key stakeholders throughout the country as many struggle to identify the reasons behind the sharp decline in the achievement gap from 2014 to 2018.

An observable, direct outcome of the recession in history education can be seen in the low number of students graduating high school and choosing a major in history or related disciplines. In his 2017 article "Decline in History Majors Continue, Departments Respond," Robert Townsend reveals a dramatic downturn in history majors. Townsend found, "New data from the US Department of Education confirms their observations, as the number of students receiving bachelor's degrees in history fell 10.1 percent from 2014 to 2015, and 21 percent from the recent high in 2012."<sup>26</sup> Townsend revealed, "History departments conferred 27,706 baccalaureate degrees in 2015 (compared to 35,065 in 2012), with the declines felt broadly across the discipline. Of the 1,228 institutions that conferred bachelor's degrees in history in 2012, 71 percent reported a reduction in the number of history graduates three years later."<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Townsend found, "New US Department of Education data for the 2018–19 academic year shows the annual number of bachelor's degrees awarded in history, history teacher education, and historic preservation and conservation fell to 23,923—down more than a third from 2012 and the smallest number awarded since the late 1980s."<sup>28</sup> This data demonstrates that students

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<sup>25</sup> Sawchuk and Sparks, "8th Graders,".

<sup>26</sup> Robert B. Townsend, "Decline in History Majors Continues, Departments Respond," *The newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, September 1, 2017, [Page #], accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2017/decline-in-history-majors-continues-departments-respond>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Robert B. Townsend, "Has the Decline in History Majors Hit Bottom?," *American Historical Association: Perspectives on History*, February 23, 2021, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/hwpxjszp>

are discovering a passion for disciplines outside of history and social studies content areas at a shocking rate as there has been a stark decline in college majors in these areas.<sup>29</sup>

### **CHALLENGE #3: LACK OF INVESTMENT IN HISTORY EDUCATION**

The alarming results of the NAEP assessment in history and civics education reveals overall student performance is in a decline across the nation, which is reminiscent of the civic decline within American society. Over the past decade, the United States of America has experienced dire partisanship and intense polarization leaving the country divided on a myriad of issues from race relations to police brutality to violent protests to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. State and national election results have been questioned and challenged in the local, state, and federal court systems. The most recent events surrounding the 2020 election results and the angry mob of people who resorted to violence as means of reversing the election results by attacking and infiltrating the United States Capitol Building on January 6th, 2021 further demonstrated the decline of civility in the country. These events justify the critically desperate need for a robust and compelling renewal of civics and history education. A NPR/IPSOS poll conducted on January 3, 2022 found, “A strong majority of Americans are feeling pessimistic about the state of the country, feeling it is in crisis.”<sup>30</sup>

- Overall, 64% agree that American democracy is in crisis and at risk of failing.
- Even more, 70%, feel the same about America itself.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Mallory Newall, Chris Jackson, and James Diamond, "Seven in ten Americans say the country is in crisis, at risk of Action Inspired Learning," *Ipsos*, last modified January 3, 2022, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/seven-ten-americans-say-country-crisis-risk-fAction Inspired Learning>.

- A majority, regardless of their gender, racial/ethnic group, generation, or region of the country, feel that America is in crisis and at risk of failing. There is also broad consensus among Democrats (68%), Republicans (79%), and independents (67%) on this.<sup>31</sup>

The NAEP assessment results in social studies education, coupled with a deeply divided nation together reveal that civics and history have been neglected and undervalued within the American educational system. *The Educating for American Democracy Roadmap* released on March 2, 2021 acknowledges the lack of emphasis on social studies education as a result of the federal educational mandates focusing school district's attention on standardized assessments. *The Roadmap* claimed that all levels of the government have failed to invest in social studies education, which is evident in the lack of funding for professional development, curriculum resources, or assessment. The miniscule investment into research and development of history and civics education is also problematic.<sup>32</sup> The introduction of *The Roadmap* claims, "state legislatures and departments of education often pass mandates to teach specific topics in these disciplines. This dynamic often results in incoherent standards at once lengthy and superficial, and too extensive to be taught in the limited time and with the scant resources allocated for social studies."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, "curricula and instructional practices alike reflect this neglect. The consequence? Generations of students have not received the high-quality education in history and civics that they need, and deserve, to prepare them for informed

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> National Endowment for the Humanities U.S. Department of Education, *Educating for American Democracy*, comp. ICivics, March 2, 2021, accessed March 8, 2021, <http://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 9.

and engaged citizenship.”<sup>34</sup> The nonprofit organization Generation Citizen wrote, “we are not teaching young people the knowledge and skills necessary to be active citizens. The recent focus on STEM education and focus on standardized testing of core subjects, while necessary in some respects, has largely pushed the discipline of civics out of the classroom. We are not teaching young people the importance of being politically engaged.”<sup>35</sup> In comparison, the federal government has invested billions of dollars into STEM education across the nation in a comprehensive effort to produce a competitive workforce, while overlooking an investment into civics education. A U.S. Department of Education press release on November 17, 2020 found, “the Department reported strong progress in implementing the Administration's five-year STEM education strategy, including building on more than \$819 million in STEM investments during fiscal years 2018 and 2019.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, *The State of Civic Education in Massachusetts Report* prepared by the Massachusetts Department of Early and Secondary Education found, “the greatest barriers to implementation reported by teachers included: not having enough time to plan and teach, having too much pressure to teach other content, and not having enough civics resources.”<sup>37</sup>

With all of the challenges facing the American democratic system, similar investments that have been made into STEM education must be infused into civics and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Generation Citizen*, accessed February 6, 2022, <http://generationcitizen.org>.

<sup>36</sup> US Department of Education, "U.S. Department of Education Delivers on Trump Administrations STEM Strategy with Historic Investment," news release, November 17, 2020, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-delivers-trump-administrations-stem-strategy-historic-investment>.

<sup>37</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, *The State of Civic Education in Massachusetts*, comp. Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, [Page #], accessed February 6, 2022, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-civic-education-massachusetts>.

history education programs along with initiatives to inspire a knowledgeable and empathetic citizenry with the skills and abilities to address the complex issues facing the nation. For example, federal or state grants could be available for student groups who create an awareness campaign, start a nonprofit organization, or desire to take action. The grants could outline criteria for student-led projects to follow in order to receive the funding. The availability of grants would further encourage educators and students to make a difference in their communities and beyond.

Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg authored *The Republic is (Still) at Risk-And Civics is Part of the Solution*, a briefing paper for Democracy at a Crossroads National Summit in September, 2017, which compiled data from their research on civic education. One study they report on is by The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement at Tufts University's Tisch College, which discovered that "35% of Millennials said they were losing faith in American democracy, and just 25% were confident in the democratic system."<sup>38</sup> The study also revealed that "60% of rural young people now live in 'civic deserts,' places where they perceive few to no opportunities to meet, discuss issues, or address problems. But this is not just an issue for those in rural areas. The report also found that about 30% of urban and suburban residents also see themselves living in civic deserts, and low-income youth of all backgrounds are widely disconnected from civic life."<sup>39</sup> In context, thirty-six of the fifty states across the country require a state social studies or civics assessment to demonstrate student achievement in the content. Unfortunately, most of the assessments are multiple

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, "The Republic is (Still) at Risk-and Civics is Part of the Solution," in *A Briefing Paper for the Democracy at a Crossroads National Summit* (n.p.: Tufts University, 2017), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

choice questions that prompt students with low level questioning and do not require higher order critical thinking skills. Student competence should also be measured through authentic assessments; for example, measuring how adept students are at proposing solutions to solve social problems or assessing how students would address issues within their communities is far more valuable to the future. Measuring students' mastery of these higher order thinking skills through authentic project-based assessments would be a more accurate method of determining students' understanding of civic engagement and their role as citizens.

The *Civics Deserts: America's Civic Health Challenge* report issued at the 2017 National Conference on Citizenship further diagnosed deficiencies in civic engagement and history education. Undoubtedly, the lack of investment into history education is causing large deficits within society and are creating civic deserts: barren educational experiences within the social studies classroom for many young people across the nation. The trends revealed in the report include:

- Both American history education and civics education have been largely stagnant in participation and achievement since the 1990s.
- The percent of Americans who read a newspaper every day has declined in tandem with dwindling rates of trust in all forms of news media.
- Confidence in all branches of government continued to decline, as turnout in both presidential and congressional elections dropped in 2016 and 2014, respectively.
- Volunteering in the United States has fallen significantly from nearly 30 percent of the population in 2005 to less than 25 percent in 2015.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Matthew N. Atwell, John Bridgeland, and Peter Levine, "Civic Deserts: America's Civic Health Challenge," in *National Conference on Citizenship* (n.p.: Tufts University, 2017), 6.

The data suggest that there is adequate evidence of a deficiency in America's civic and historical educational system. In particular, points 1 & 4 above highlight the lack of participation and volunteerism within American society. Could this decline in civic participation be traced to the lack of engagement inside of social studies classrooms? I would argue that the lack of investment into history education ultimately fails to create opportunities inside of classrooms to effectively educate young people on their roles in a democratic system; ultimately demonstrating that opportunities do not exist for students to participate. The inability for students to enact change within a community is a hindrance to the overall health and well-being of American democracy. Social studies classrooms can easily encourage and create opportunities to increase a spirit of volunteerism and participation among students in community events, local nonprofit organizations, political campaigns, or social justice causes. The data reveal that now is the time for a renewal of civic virtues and democratic ideals within the United States educational system to engage students in authentic learning to restore integrity and fidelity to civic participation and engagement. Creating authentic learning experiences for students to participate in their communities is an answer to the problem of civic deserts in American society.

### **THE SOLUTION**

The 2018 NAEP Report Card demonstrates the scarcity of authentic learning experiences in many American schools beyond just history classes as student participants responded to survey questions during the assessment regarding their confidence in civics-related knowledge and skills. The Nation's Report Card found:

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As part of the 2018 civics assessment, eighth-grade students were asked survey questions about their confidence in demonstrating civics and/or U.S. government-related knowledge and skills. For example, students reported whether they believed they could explain the roles and functions of the three branches of the U.S. government and explain the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizens. Students' responses to these survey questions were combined to create an index that focuses on their confidence in civics-related knowledge and skills. In 2018, seventy-four percent of students at grade 8 reported low to moderate levels of confidence in their civics-related knowledge and skills. Students who reported low or moderate levels of confidence in their civics-related knowledge and skills scored lower on average (144 and 154, respectively) than students who reported high levels of confidence (167). In addition, students who reported low levels of confidence in their civics-related knowledge and skills scored lower on average than students who reported moderate levels of confidence.<sup>41</sup>

If the expectation for each student inside of a social studies classroom is to simply demonstrate compliance as they listen to a lecture; record notes; memorize facts and dates; and answer matching, multiple choice, and true or false questions, the manifestation will be more of the same in regards to student performance on state and national assessments. In 2012, Roberson and Woody wrote, "All the participants of the school and classroom must make the shift, leaving the Essentialist philosophy behind and adopting a student-centered philosophy wholeheartedly because there is no halfway point, no best of both worlds happy medium, no option to pick-and-choose the parts that are agreeable. Success will only come from a new way of seeing, believing, and acting."<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, if nothing changes, the nation will continue to graduate an uninformed citizenry, who are ultimately responsible for the future welfare and direction of American society. The data presented from the NAEP surveys demonstrate what type of learning high performing students participate in when learning social studies content. Students who

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<sup>41</sup> Department of Education, *NAEP Report Card: U.S. History*, 2019, accessed March 13, 2021, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ushistory/survey-questionnaires/>.

<sup>42</sup> Sam Roberson and Cynthia Woody, "Declaring Civil War on Essentialist Teaching," *The Clearing House* 85 (2012): 212.

demonstrate high proficiency have experiences that shape and inspire their learning. One obvious solution to the problems outlined above can be discovered through the creation of authentic experiences within a classroom that foster an environment for students to actively engage their learning through the application of knowledge and skills to propose dynamic solutions to the societal conflicts or global issues they seek to address and prevent.

Whether they are hands-on activities, actively reading primary source documents, organizing a service project, raising awareness about a human rights violation, writing letters to their representatives, delivering speeches, or analyzing current events, student-centered learning inspires and empowers students to comprehend the essential knowledge and skills through authentic and dynamic experiences. For example, as part of a civics course, students can advocate for legislation at the state or federal level. Students could testify on behalf of a bill once it is introduced in one house of the government. They could contact their local representative and encourage them to support or sponsor the bill and ultimately vote for the bill. Students could articulate their endorsement of the bill through social media or create a campaign to encourage citizens to advocate for the passage of the bill. Students could invite the sponsor(s) of the bill to speak at their school or a rally they organize to engage the public. Furthermore, students could orchestrate a letter writing campaign to promote their support for the bill. If the bill passes, the students could advocate for the governor or president to sign the bill into law. Overall, students would learn far more effectively about how a bill becomes a law, the branches of government, the role of their representatives, or the democratic process through authentic learning experiences as opposed to reading a textbook or listening to a lecture.

Students must experience their learning, for when they do, high levels of engagement and competency are exhibited. Furthermore, beyond just experiencing their learning, students must be actively engaged in the learning process. The philosophy inside of my classroom was simple: we learn history to make history. I believe that history is a verb, an action word; it is something that we have the opportunity to do and make. Learning must possess an active component, especially inside of a social studies classroom where students have agency to determine what and how they learn. In *A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies*, a 2016 position statement written by The National Council for the Social Studies, the authors wrote, “Active lessons require students to process and think about what they are learning. There is a profound difference between learning about the actions and conclusions of others and reasoning one’s way toward those conclusions.”<sup>43</sup> James Loewen (2018) wrote, “History comes alive when students do, rather than merely read, history.”<sup>44</sup> Loewen continued, “Preparing students to live in that America, making them ready for that important task, is why we teach U.S. history in the first place. Having students do history-not just read it-is the best way to equip them for that crucial responsibility.”<sup>45</sup> When the subject of history comes alive to a young person, performance inside of the classroom will increase, a student’s desire to learn will expand, civic engagement will rise, and students will be far more attuned learners and efficient contributing citizens.

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<sup>43</sup>The National Council for the Social Studies, "A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies," in *A Position Statement of the National Council for the Social Studies* (n.p.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2016), 182.

<sup>44</sup> James W. Loewen, *Teaching What Really Happened*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2018), 91.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 106.

In this dissertation I explore the impact of this kind of engaged experiential learning on students and the ways in which those experiences influence their college, career, and civic participation. Instead of just learning history, I want to explore what happens when students are inspired to make history. I am attempting to discover how a learning experience in middle and high school endures beyond the classroom and influences students as adults. To find answers, I interviewed sixteen students who participated in and led a multi-year project to apply what they learned to propose bold solutions by using education as a means of prevention to raise awareness about human trafficking in their community and beyond. As the students reflect on their participation in the project as well as how the project impacted their lives, I am seeking to answer the following questions.

- What are the instructional practices and pedagogical methodologies that motivate students in social studies classrooms to make history?
- How did the students' participation in student-led projects impact their college experience, career choices, and civic engagement as adults?
- What are the impacts and outcomes of authentic and experiential learning experiences on students rather than traditional learning experiences?

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION**

Education has become a controversial centerpiece of American political and social discourse. History education, in particular, has raised many questions and sparked much debate over what is being taught and what students are learning. At the heart of the debate is the acknowledgment that education is a transformational force in American society, yielding much power and influence over the hearts and minds of generations of young people. With mounting pressure from interest groups, corporations, and government agencies, education remains focused on the most important factor: the teacher and students inside of the classroom. As a major component to the ongoing educational debate centers around how history is taught, this dissertation will explore how students can take action using the knowledge and skills they acquire from authentic and experiential learning opportunities.

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION?**

First, it is imperative to establish the purpose of the American educational system and examine the collective focus on educating current and future generations. With the establishment of the public education system in the early half of the nineteenth century, the education of children has been a primary focus of American society for nearly two hundred years. From the one room schoolhouse to state of the art technical schools, the general purpose of education has remained focused on preparing students for what comes next. Every generation has a different perception of the purpose of education. In 1839 Boston journalist Orestes Brownson described the informal education young people receive by the community by which they are raised; he wrote, “Education, such as it is, is

ever going on. Our children are educated in the streets, by the influence of their associates...in the bosom of the family, by the love and gentleness or wrath and fretfulness of parents, by the passions or affections they see manifested, the conversations to which they listen, and above all the general pursuits, habits, and moral tone of the community.”<sup>46</sup> He described a formal education received by many young people as he wrote, “in all these are schoolrooms and schoolmasters sending forth scholars educated for good or for evil or, what is more likely, for a little of both. The real question for us to ask is not, shall our children be educated? But, to what end shall they be educated, and by what means? What is the kind of education needed, and how shall it be furnished?”<sup>47</sup>

Horace Mann and Catherine Beecher, both educational reformers and advocates of public education as well as contemporaries of Brownson, “believed morality was the end of public education.”<sup>48</sup> Public education instantly progressed throughout the eighteenth century as school buildings grew from one room schoolhouses educating few young people to large school buildings educating the masses of students at the turn of the twentieth century.

As the debate surrounding the purpose of education intensified at the beginning of the new century, two influential and brilliant men articulated clear positions which resonated throughout American society. The prominent educational and philosophical debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois centered on the preparation of the mind versus the preparation of the body. Even though their debate focused on the

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<sup>46</sup> Orestes Brownson, "Review of Second Annual Report of the Board of Education. Together with the Second Annual Report to the Secretary of Education," *Boston Quarterly Review* 2 (1839).

<sup>47</sup> Brownson, "Review of Second."

<sup>48</sup> Dana Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2015), 32.

education of young black people following slavery and reconstruction, their positions and platforms communicated a larger context of the nation as a whole when considering the overall purpose of education. Booker T. Washington believed that his students, “needed a basic education in reading and numeracy, as well as hands-on vocational training in brickmaking, tailoring, and carpentry-skills he hoped would inculcate personal discipline and industry.”<sup>49</sup> Washington believed that education should prepare young people with the technical skills and abilities to be highly successful in American society. On the other hand, W.E.B. DuBois, who was educated at Harvard University and the University of Berlin, “dreamed of catapulting the most academically promising poor black children, whom he dubbed the ‘talented tenth’ straight from abject southern poverty into the intelligentsia by providing them with a classical education in literature, history, math, Latin, and Greek.”<sup>50</sup> For young people outside of the “talented tenth,” Du Bois did endorse a skilled vocational education experience to prepare them for a career in industry or the trades.<sup>51</sup> Whether preparing minds or preparing bodies, Du Bois and Washington agreed that education was an essential means in the development of a young person in preparing them for a successful career.

Another perspective on the purpose of education is exemplified by Eleanor Roosevelt as she links the educational system with creating ‘good’ Americans. In 1930, Roosevelt authored, *Good Citizenship: The Purpose of Education*, and wrote:

What is the purpose of education? The conventional answer is the acquisition of knowledge, the reading of books, and the learning of facts. We begin to hear more frequently that the function of education is to give children a desire to learn and to teach them how to use their minds and where to go to acquire facts when their

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<sup>49</sup> Goldstein, *The Teacher*, 56.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 56 & 57.

curiosity is aroused. Even more all-embracing than this is the statement made not long ago, before a group of English headmasters, by the Archbishop of York, that "the true purpose of education is to produce citizens."<sup>52</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, the purpose of education has been viewed through the lens of strengthening a democratic society by teaching what it means to be a good citizen. Naturally, the public education system played an additional critical role in teaching immigrants to the United States how to be American citizens as well. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Committee on Platform Beliefs stated in January of 1957, "The main purpose of the American school is to provide for the fullest possible development of each learner for living morally, creatively, and productively in a democratic society."<sup>53</sup> It is clear that the linkage between a young person's education and preservation of a democratic society establishes the foundation of a fundamental core-value within American society.

Education, however, does not have a singular purpose; in addition to teaching students how to become good and productive citizens to strengthen a democratic society, education can and should personally influence the individual. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. defines the purpose of education as he wrote, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education."<sup>54</sup> Moving beyond the basic acquisition of knowledge, Dr. King believed the purpose of education is to teach

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<sup>52</sup>Eleanor Roosevelt, "Good Citizenship: The Purpose of Education," Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, accessed March 7, 2022, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/good-citizenship-purpose-education>.

<sup>53</sup> Willona M. Sloan, "What is the Purpose of Education," *ASCD* (blog), entry posted July 1, 2012, accessed March 7, 2022, <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/what-is-the-purpose-of-education>.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Purpose of Education," *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, 1, accessed March 7, 2022, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/purpose-education>.



individuals how to think; further, he supported that activating the innate ability to think critically influences students to possess a deep sense of ethical and honorable character.

Additionally, analyzing the purpose of education through the perspectives of influential educational theorists John Dewey and Paulo Freire is critical to the objective of this dissertation. Education undoubtedly has an enormous amount of direct influence on the individual who in turn precisely influences the community they exist within. To examine the purpose of education in the life of the individual it is important to identify the desired outcome for both the individual and the collective community of which the individual has the potential to influence. John Dewey believed that the purpose of education is to provide young people with the knowledge and skills they need to become successful contributing members of society. In 1934, Dewey wrote:

The purpose of education has always been to everyone, in essence, the same-to give the young the things they need in order to develop in an orderly, sequential way into members of society. It is the purpose of education today, whether this education goes on in a one-room school in the mountains of Tennessee or in the most advanced, progressive school in a radical community. Any education is, in its forms and methods, an outgrowth of the needs of the society in which it exists.<sup>55</sup>

John Dewey viewed education as the means in which young people are provided with all they need to function and be successful within society. Additionally, he linked the methods of education with the needs of society and the knowledge the young person gains while in school. Ultimately, Dewey's goal of education, "is a democratic society and an individual whose powers and capacities, especially in their social bearings, are developed to the utmost."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Dewey, "Individual Psychology and Education," *The Philosopher*, 12, 1934.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Betz, "John Dewey and Paulo Freire," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 115.

Brazilian educator and author Paulo Freire described the goal of education as a relationship between the teacher and the students. Freire wrote:

...our relationship with the learner demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them. To try to know the reality that our students live is a task that the educational practice imposes on us: Without this, we have no access to the way they think, so only with great difficulty can we perceive what and how they know.<sup>57</sup>

Establishing a rapport with students provides an educator with understanding of how the conditions of the young person's world shape their own individual worldview and its impact on the student's overall educational experience. Throughout his many pedagogical writings, Freire described students as transformers of the world; he believed that highly-effective education held the deeply rooted power to change and transform society.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, the goal of education for Freire is liberation for students who then, in turn, transform the world in which they live. Joseph Betz wrote, "the goal of education for Freire is not unlike the goal for Dewey, an empowered individual in a democratic society, though the relevant vocabulary is much different."<sup>59</sup> As a young person is liberated from their educational experiences they acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities to empower them to not only contribute to the society around them; they transform it for the better.

## **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF HISTORY EDUCATION?**

Over time the purpose of education is viewed by individuals as the preparation of young people to possess a significant amount of knowledge and skills to not just become positive contributors to society as a whole but to be inspired and empowered to transform

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<sup>57</sup> Paulo Freire, *Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998)

<sup>58</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 1970), 83.

<sup>59</sup> Betz, "John Dewey," 116.

society. With an emphasis placed on the educational system to raise up good citizens who will positively contribute to society, it is imperative to determine and define the purpose of social studies education in the development of young people. The National Council for the Social Studies is the leading organization in the United States for social studies education. The Council, through setting the course for education policy, influences state teaching standards and hosts an annual national conference for educators across the country. The Council established the primary objective and purpose of social studies education as, “The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.”<sup>60</sup> Their vision statement communicates, “A world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action.”<sup>61</sup> Their mission statement describes how they will accomplish their vision, “advocating and building capacity for high-quality social studies by providing leadership, services, and support to educators.”<sup>62</sup> According to the Council, the purpose of social studies education is to prepare young people to think critically about the world around them and to contribute to society through active citizenship, leadership, and service.

In chapter sixteen of *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey wrote about the significance of Geography and History education. Dewey notes that, “the knowledge of the past is the key to understanding the present. History deals with the past, but this past is the history of the present. The true starting point of history is always some present

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<sup>60</sup> National Council for the Social Studies, "About, Mission, & Vision," National Council for the Social Studies, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.socialstudies.org/about>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

situation with its problems.”<sup>63</sup> Dewey provides an insightful perspective of learning history through an analysis of current events and present global issues. Teaching students history through the context of current issues creates opportunities for social studies teachers and students to unpack the complexities of the event or problem in such a manner that they could discover potential solutions. Dewey detailed the purpose of history education further as he wrote:

The use of history for cultivating a socialized intelligence constitutes its moral significance. It is possible to employ it as a kind of reservoir of anecdotes to be drawn on to inculcate special moral lessons on this virtue or that vice. But such teaching is not so much an ethical use of history as it is an effort to create moral impressions by means of more or less authentic material. At best, it produces a temporary emotional glow; at worst, callous indifference to moralizing. The assistance which may be given by history to a more intelligent sympathetic understanding of the social situations of the present in which individuals share is a permanent and constructive moral asset.<sup>64</sup>

Dewey marks a clear distinction between teaching history through a “reservoir of anecdotes” as opposed to creating a learning environment where students personally connect with present events in which “individuals share is a permanent and constructive moral asset.”<sup>65</sup> Under this distinction of education the purpose of social studies education is to authentically connect the learner with the past as they relate it to the present social situations. Provost William Gaudelli and Professor Megan Lavery contextualize Dewey’s philosophy on history education, “Given the seriousness of the global issues facing current and future generations, there is abundant need for this type of critical education, of an active sense of the past that works toward the future rather than an

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<sup>63</sup> Dewey, *Democracy & Education*, 121.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

unnecessarily specialized one that is inert.”<sup>66</sup> It is imperative that social studies courses inspire a broader worldview for the student to see with new vision the distinct impact they can make on the world around them.

### **WHAT ARE THE CURRENT CHALLENGES WITH SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION?**

As already stated, the general purpose of education is to prepare young people to be active citizens who positively contribute to society through the knowledge and skills they acquire from an engaging and inspiring educational experience. The opening chapter of this dissertation analyzed areas of difficulty within social studies education which leads to the question: What are the current challenges to an effective and empowering social studies education? The standard of history education thus far has been designed around a lecture based instructional format where students receive large amounts of content information and are expected to memorize facts for an end of the unit assessment. All too often students spend their valuable time passively listening to a teacher demonstrate how much they know about the subject being taught. Unfortunately, when students are not inspired to think critically about solving problems, they are also not empowered to make a difference in the world around them, their voices are not amplified, and they are never challenged to respond to what they have learned by actually doing something valuable with the knowledge they have gained. Static learning is the outcome of a traditional lecture based history education. Ultimately, static learning lacks movement, action, or change, especially in a manner that is viewed as desirable or

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<sup>66</sup> W. Gaudelli & M Lavery, *Reconstruction of Social Studies*, 29.

interesting.<sup>67</sup> Thus, static learning produces students who are disengaged from learning and disconnected from the subject matter.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* educational theorist Paulo Freire described the banking concept of education and begins by describing the role of the teacher as the “depositor” of information. In 1970 Freire wrote:

The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His/her task is to ‘fill’ the students with the contents of his (her) narration - contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that endangered them and could give them significance.<sup>68</sup>

This instructional approach makes students into passive learners who merely record information and memorize facts. Freire described the impact this type of learning has on individual students, “Worse yet, it turns them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. The more completely he/she fills the receptacles, the better teacher he/she is. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.”<sup>69</sup> Freire further unpacked this concept, “Instead of communicating, the teacher makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do...become collectors and cataloguers of the things they store.”<sup>70</sup>

Freire accurately described the unfortunate reality of the learning experiences of many students in K-12 education and, more specifically, a history classroom. For example, in a

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<sup>67</sup> Merriam-Webster, “static (adj.),” accessed March 8, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/static>

<sup>68</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 1970), 71.

<sup>69</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 72.

history classroom the experience for many students is a teacher-centered, textbook focused classroom with daily lectures about important facts, dates, and events. Students are expected to comply by taking notes and memorizing the information deposited into them only to regurgitate the facts at the end of the unit assessment. In this instructional concept, students are told what they should know and are not provided the opportunity to think critically, investigate content, analyze and synthesize sources, or communicate their own unique thoughts and opinions. The students are mere “containers” and “receptacles” of information; in this model of learning students are passive and compliant learners, never empowered to do something with the knowledge they have gained.

In analyzing the term “oppression” there are both tangible and philosophical components to the unjust treatment of an individual by another. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire described the literal oppression of Brazil’s population in the 1960s. Betz wrote, “Freire became concerned with the plight of the desperately poor 70% of Brazil’s 80 million people who usually receive little to no formal education. He has been successful both in overcoming illiteracy and in promoting dignity in these poor.”<sup>71</sup> Freire clearly acknowledges the effects of physical or tangible oppression of poverty on society as well as the educational experience of millions of young people throughout the world. However, looking at oppression through a philosophical perspective is another way to interpret Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. For example, the “banking concept” does not promote democracy in a classroom and does not empower students to own their learning as it leads to compliant and passive learning void of passion and purpose. In Joseph Betz’ article “John Dewey and Paulo Freire,” he wrote, “the ‘banking concept of

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<sup>71</sup> Betz, John Dewey and Paulo Freire, 107.

education', Freire thinks it is an instrument of repression. In it the oppressor puts ideas into the head of the oppressed the same way one puts money into a bank. These ideas are chosen to protect the status quo and to keep it from being seen as a problem."<sup>72</sup>

Therefore, the "banking concept" of education does promote both physical and literal oppression in the context of young people in Brazil during the 1960s as well as metaphorical or symbolic oppression of a student in America's most privileged school districts. Freire wrote, "(Oppression) attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power."<sup>73</sup> Therefore, it is determined that the literal and metaphorical aspects of oppressive pedagogy promote the suppression of student leadership, creativity, and agency inside of a classroom.

In *The School and Society*, John Dewey described the context of traditional education in 1900. He begins Chapter 2: "The School and The Life of the Child" by recounting a failed attempt at trying to purchase appropriate workspaces for students to be creative in school. In the midst of the difficulty to locate the student desks, the salesman remarked, "I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening."<sup>74</sup> Dewey continued:

That tells the story of traditional education. So if we put before the mind's eye the ordinary schoolroom, with its rows of ugly desks placed in geometrical order, crowded together so that there shall be as little moving room as possible, desks almost all of the same size, with just space enough to hold books, pencils and paper...we can reconstruct the only educational activity that can possibly go in such a place. It is all made 'for listening'.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>73</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy*, 77

<sup>74</sup> Dewey, *The School and Society*, 21

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 21.



Dewey cryptically describes the state of education in the 21st century as classrooms throughout the United States are arranged for students to be listeners and not workers. Similar to Freire, Dewey depicts a learning environment where students are compliant and passive in the learning process as they sit and listen, they are “containers” and “receptacles” to be filled with information. John Dewey further explains the nature of the classroom with large amounts of desks arranged in a way to handle large amounts of students *en masse*. Dewey wrote, “the moment children act they individualize themselves; they cease to be a mass, and become the intensely distinctive beings that we are acquainted with out of school.” Similar to Freire, John Dewey identified the oppression of a learner held hostage by a “banking concept” as he wrote, “The typical points of old education: its passivity of attitude, its mechanical massing of children, its uniformity of curriculum and method. It may be summed up by stating that the centre of gravity is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself.”<sup>76</sup> Dewey, a visionary light years ahead of his time, articulated the status quo of social studies instruction in 2022, more than one hundred years ago.

Modern educational theorists William Gaudelli and Megan Lavery argued for a reconstruction of social studies as they identified current issues within the discipline focused on how instruction is delivered and how students are taught. They found, “the field of social studies has become fragmented and isolated in the very ways that Dewey warned against, and that his philosophy should be used to reconstruct social studies

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<sup>76</sup> Dewey, *The School and Society*, 23.

education.”<sup>77</sup> In their article they identify a few traps the discipline has fallen for as many have sought to legitimize social studies as a stand-alone discipline; they have ultimately limited the scope of the social sciences and institutions to a more narrow focus.

Additionally, they argue that all too often students are micro- managed to approach history or political science through a particular pedagogical format, and they lose out on seeing the larger picture. With such an emphasis placed on knowledge and skills in social studies, students rarely observe what is possible as students of history. They found, “the problem arises when these modes of thought are reified as skills whose acquisition supplants the larger aim of social studies: to develop thoughtful, socially responsible beings.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Gaudelli and Laverty expound on the current issue in social studies education, they wrote:

The field of social studies does not ignite the social imagination of students. Instead of being awakened to the profound influence and consequence of customs, traditions, and institutions, students feel instead as if they must learn to demarcate the different realms of human existence: geographic, economic, political, and social. Thus, students fail to connect the potency of social influence with the formation of their own attitudes, aspirations, and possibilities.<sup>79</sup>

This statement echoes what Dewey and Freire described decades earlier in their exploration of student apathy in learning as they describe the banking concept of education, a “reservoir of anecdotes,” and students being confined to just listening. Gaudelli and Laverty affirm the lack of connection for students who are not empowered by their learning to expand their worldview to identify the wide open possibilities right in front of them.

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<sup>77</sup> Gaudelli & Laverty, *Reconstruction*, 19.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

## PROGRESS IN SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION

Even though there are debates about how history is taught inside K-12 education, over the past two decades, much progress has been made in providing students with valuable opportunities to experience their learning. Pioneered by the National Council for the Social Studies, visionary educational leaders have encouraged teachers across the nation to make the necessary connections between their curriculum and service, human rights, and inquiry-based learning. These components create a classroom environment where students can practically engage their community, connect with current global issues, and deepen their thinking through curiosity as they encounter compelling, open-ended questions. Thus, there are multiple approaches and instructional strategies that support this progression, including service learning, human rights education, and inquiry-based learning.

### 1. SERVICE LEARNING

In light of the challenges outlined, there has been significant progress in social studies education through the integration of a number of effective strategies to engage and empower students. The first is Service Learning, defined by the National Council for the Social Studies as a pedagogy that:

Connects meaningful service in the school or community with academic learning and civic responsibility. Service-learning is distinguished from community service or volunteerism in two ways. First, the service activity is integrated with academic skills and content. Second, students engage in structured reflection activities on their service experiences.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> National Council for the Social Studies, "Service-Learning: An Essential Component of Citizenship Education," in *A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies*, 1, last modified May 2000, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/publications/se/6504/650408.html>.

In her article “The Effects of Service Learning” (2000), Shelley Billing defined Service Learning as, “thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet authentic community needs, specifically giving students an opportunity to make decisions and solve problems.”<sup>81</sup> Billing further explained in her article that the strongest findings in research literature on service learning and youth developments,<sup>82</sup> “that students who engaged in service learning were more sensitive and showed greater acceptance of cultural diversity. The body of evidence that links service learning to young people’s personal and social development is relatively robust.”<sup>83</sup>

Service Learning makes relevant connections to the curriculum, while providing students with practical opportunities to serve their communities. In 2004 (2nd Ed., 2018) Cathryn Berger Kaye wrote, *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, and Social Action* in which she defined Service Learning: “Simply put, service learning connects school-based curriculum with the inherent caring and concern young people have for their world-whether on their school campus, at a local food bank, or in a distant rainforest. The results are memorable, lifelong lessons for students and foster a stronger society for us all.”<sup>84</sup> In her comprehensive work on Service Learning, Kaye described the four different categories of service. First is Direct Service where students provide direct service and interactions are person to person, such as tutoring a younger child or working

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<sup>81</sup> Billing H. Shelley, “The Effects of Service Learning,” *Service Learning, General*, nos. Paper 42 (August 2000): 2-3, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/42/>.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Cathryn Berger Kaye, *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN.: Free Spirit Publishing, 2018), 8.

with refugees.<sup>85</sup> The next category is Indirect Service or instances when the indirect activities of the students do not interact with individuals directly; however, their actions benefit the community. Indirect Service examples include collecting items for a food bank, sponsoring a clothing drive, or creating a newsletter for a retirement community. Another category is Advocacy or a form of service where students create awareness of or promote action on an issue; Advocacy could involve writing letters, making speeches, and promoting a campaign.<sup>86</sup> Kaye refers to the last type of Service Learning as Research. For example, “students may develop surveys or conduct formal studies, evaluations, experiments, or interviews.”<sup>87</sup> The type of service selected will determine the activities conducted.

The theory of Service Learning possesses natural connections with the content of social studies curriculum standards, which prompt a teacher to incorporate service as a facet of their pedagogy. In the 2011 article, “Service-Learning in Social Studies Classrooms,” Thomas Kessinger described how service learning can be integrated within social studies educational experiences. Kessinger wrote, “Perhaps history or government students would want to translate what they read and studied into greater participation in the political process by working to assist those who need to register to vote or by working within the political process for a particular candidate or issue.”<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) released, *Service-Learning: An Essential Component of Citizenship Education*, a position statement in May 2000 which outlined a

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas A. Kessinger, "Service-Learning in Social Studies Classrooms," *Ohio Social Studies Review* 47, no. 2 (2011): 24].

rationale, a definition, and the benefits of service learning. NCSS identified three benefits which include:

First, service-learning activities provide relevant and motivational opportunities for students to connect the principles and processes of democratic life with practical community problem solving. Second, service-learning increases students' awareness of the community and world around them. Finally, service-learning enhances the development of democratic values and attitudes.<sup>89</sup>

The NCSS position statement concluded, "Service-learning greatly enhances the potential for social studies teachers to fulfill their mission of educating informed and active citizens who are committed to improving society through the democratic process."<sup>90</sup>

Service learning does create unique opportunities for students to learn through service to their communities or to others. These authentic experiences inspire students to learn outside of the classroom and beyond the textbook as they serve a greater purpose and cause to improve their society.

## **2. HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION**

Over the past twenty-five years, social studies education has progressed in regards to the integration of Human Rights Education throughout state standards as well as curriculum documents. In 2000, Dr. Dennis Banks conducted *Promises to Keep: Results of the National Survey of Human Rights Education*, to understand the degree to which Human Rights was incorporated in K-12 education. Dr. Banks (2000) found, "Forty percent (20) of the states studied indicate that human rights education is within the state mandated curriculum...A recent updating of that survey shows an increase. As of Fall

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<sup>89</sup> National Council for the Social Studies, "Service-Learning: An Essential Component of Citizenship Education," in *A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies*, 1, last modified May 2000, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/publications/se/6504/650408.html>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

2007, 72% (36) of the states include HRE concepts and/or content within their state social studies standards.”<sup>91</sup> The National Council for the Social Studies issued a position statement in 2021 on Human Rights Education and defined it as, “a lifelong process of teaching and learning that helps individuals, groups, and communities develop the knowledge, skills, and values to fully exercise and protect their human rights and those of others; to fulfill their responsibilities in the context of internationally recognized human rights principles; and to achieve justice and peace in the world.”<sup>92</sup> The NCSS position statement is a comprehensive overview of Human Rights Education which provides a background on human rights education, recommendations for successful implementation, and suggestions for the development of the effective human rights educator. In the section “Fostering Youth Engagement and Voice” NCSS revealed, “Young people have some of the greatest opportunities to become engaged, active global citizens through well crafted, robust human rights education opportunities. Young people should feel that their learning is rights centered, and that both their peers and educators promote equality, dignity, respect, non-discrimination, and engaged participation.”<sup>93</sup>

Over the past three decades the progress to incorporate human rights education throughout social studies has been fostered by the solid foundation established by educators such as Nancy Flowers. She is a founding member of Human Rights Educators USA and developed Amnesty International’s educational resources and materials. In

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<sup>91</sup> Dennis N. Banks, Ph.D, *Promises to Keep: Results of the National Survey of Human Rights Education 2000 Updated November, 2007*, [Page #], November 2007, accessed February 27, 2022, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/links/survey2007.html>.

<sup>92</sup> National Council for the Social Studies, "Human Rights Education," in *National Council for the Social Studies*, last modified 2021, accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/human-rights-education>.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

2000, Flowers published *The Human Rights Education Handbook: Effective Practices for Learning, Action, and Change*, a 178-page document, breaking down human rights education into seven different parts. In part 1, Flowers wrote:

Around the globe, grass-roots organizations of all kinds are using the human rights framework to advocate for social change, for example opposing violence against women, toxic dumping, child labor, and lack of housing or health care as human rights violations. As a result, these groups are providing innovative human rights education to the communities they serve—the poor, refugees and immigrants, indigenous peoples, gays and lesbians, rural and migrant peoples, and minorities of all kinds. They have effectively redefined human rights education in the process.<sup>94</sup>

*The Human Rights Education Handbook* is an exhaustive compilation of the essential components and methodologies for educators to learn how to include human rights focused lessons in their classroom.

Similar to Flowers, Rosemary Ann Blanchard is the Chair of the National Council for the Social Studies Human Rights Education Community and Co-Vice Chair of Human Rights Educators USA has been instrumental in the advancement of Human Rights Education. In her 2014 article “Mainstreaming Human Rights Education” Blanchard wrote, “In the long run, for Human Rights Education to become an institutionalized part of the core educational experience of every child in every public school in the U.S...there will need to be system-wide institutionalized support for human rights education and for the development of human rights-friendly schools.”<sup>95</sup> It is imperative for administrators, teachers, and students to assume personal responsibility in

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<sup>94</sup> Nancy Flowers, "The Human Rights Education Handbook," in *Human Rights Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Human Rights Resource Center, University of Minnesota, 2000), 17.

<sup>95</sup> Rosemary Ann Blanchard, "Mainstreaming Human Rights Education - A New NCSS Community Looks Forward," *Journal of International Social Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014): 127.



fostering an educational environment that values and develops human rights-friendly classrooms, schools, and communities.

### **3. C3 FRAMEWORK & INQUIRY BASED LEARNING**

In 2013, the National Council for the Social Studies released the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. Deeply influenced by the Common Core State Standards, NCSS constructed the C3 Framework to articulate the necessary skills young must possess in preparation for college, career, and civic life. The purpose of the C3 Framework is revealed within of the introduction to the document:

Advocates of citizenship education cross the political spectrum, but they are bound by a common belief that our democratic republic will not sustain unless students are aware of their changing cultural and physical environments; know the past; read, write, and think deeply; and act in ways that promote the common good. There will always be differing perspectives on these objectives. The goal of knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens, however, is universal.<sup>96</sup>

The framework follows an inquiry arc which motivates both teachers and students to discover knowledge and understanding through questioning. The framework is constructed in four dimensions: Dimension 1 - Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries, Dimension 2 - Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts, Dimension 3 - Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence, and Dimension 4 - Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.<sup>97</sup>

In the context of inspiring young people to do something impactful as a response to their learning experience, the C3 Framework reveals two valuable concepts. First, inquiry-based learning requires students to think critically as they are developing and

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<sup>96</sup> National Council for the Social Studies, "The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards," in *National Council for the Social Studies*, 5, last modified 2013, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/c3/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

responding to compelling questions, which motivate young people to discover greater access to information. Simply stated, “Questioning is key to student learning. The C3 Framework encourages the use of compelling and supporting questions, both teacher- and student-generated, as a central element of the teaching and learning process.”<sup>98</sup> Questions guide the investigation of a human rights violation or a social justice cause. As students inquire about an issue or topic, their questions will lead them to seek deeper questions which will inevitably enhance their learning process.

Second, the C3 Framework incorporates Taking Informed Action into the final stage of the inquiry arc and is described in the document, “In social studies, students use disciplinary knowledge, skills, and perspectives to inquire about problems involved in public issues; deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues; take constructive, independent, and collaborative action; reflect on their actions; and create and sustain groups.”<sup>99</sup> In the suggested K-12 pathway of the C3 Framework, Dimension Four states that by the end of 12th grade students will, “Apply a range of deliberative and democratic strategies and procedures to make decisions and take action in their classrooms, schools, and out-of-school civic contexts.”<sup>100</sup> Taking Informed Action urges social studies educators to consider the importance of fostering a learning environment where students are inspired and motivated to act upon their learning. Through the research process, students continually grapple with compelling questions which guide their discovery and once that is reached they will have the space to take informed action.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 62.

Within service learning, human rights education, and inquiry-based learning students are at the center of the learning process; therefore, the “banking concept” of education is immediately challenged by educators who place value on student agency. The three components of effective social studies instruction provide pathways for educators to engage students in authentic methods that place experiential learning at the forefront of student learning. Through these pathways, students are liberated from the teacher-centered classroom, which confines them to mere receptacles of information.

### **WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?**

The “banking concept” of education described by Freire does not promote passion, empathy, or student agency as the teacher teaches and the students are taught. It produces passive learning that simply rewards compliant behavior, which does not provide space for critical thinking, problem solving, or social justice. Freire wrote, “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.”<sup>101</sup> How will students truly see their role in the world around them if they are not given the opportunity to make relevant connections between their learning and current events and issues that shape their society? Learning that is relevant disrupts the “banking concept” of education by empowering students to take ownership of their learning to advance thinking and propose solutions to global problems and current issues. When students are empowered by their learning they are given the opportunity to explore, investigate, and discover where they fit into the broader context of the world and determine how they can make a difference.

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<sup>101</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 73.

In response to the “banking concept” of education, Paulo Freire described how to reverse the instructional concept of the teacher-centered classroom where the students are passive, compliant learners. Freire developed problem-posing education, “through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-students with students-teachers. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.”<sup>102</sup> Growing in knowledge and understanding is a shared learning experience where the students become the teachers and the teachers become the students.<sup>103</sup> The students own their learning, deeply investigating global issues and current problems through research to further their own understanding and, in turn, share that information gained with their teacher and peers. The teacher facilitates the educational process by creating an environment where students are empowered to assume leadership roles and have unique learning experiences.

When the teacher becomes the student and student becomes the teacher, there is a convergence of learning, the process is shared, and the collaboration ultimately produces a net gain of knowledge and understanding by every participant, including the teacher. Collaboratively, the students and teachers discover their existence within the broader context of the world around them, identify their roles, and determine their course of action. Freire further explained, “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.”<sup>104</sup> As students engage in learning that is relevant, they seek

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<sup>102</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 83-86.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

to solve real problems that exist in their world and begin to see their role as problem solvers and are empowered to become difference makers. Freire wrote, “it is also true that the form of action they adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world,”<sup>105</sup> because, “Problem posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation.”<sup>106</sup> Students are trusted to solve problems and propose solutions as empowered leaders on a particular issue. As students are inspired by passion, empathy, and agency, they are empowered to own their learning as they seek to solve societal injustices and accomplish something meaningful to bring about lasting progress and change.

In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey articulated the importance of the connection between purpose and experience in the learning process. Dewey identified his belief that genuine purpose always begins with an impulse.<sup>107</sup> Students identify their learning impulses as they discover passion, empathy, and agency. Dewey wrote, “obstruction of the immediate execution of an impulse converts into desire. Nevertheless neither impulse nor desire is itself a purpose. A purpose is an end-view. That is, it involves foresight of the consequences which will result from acting upon impulse.”<sup>108</sup> Dewey wrote, “a purpose differs from an original impulse and desire through its translation into a plan and method of action based upon foresight of the consequences of

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>107</sup> Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 67.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 67

acting under given observed conditions in a certain way.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, experiential learning is at the heart of finding a solution to disengaged and apathetic learning within a social studies classroom. In reference to Dewey's assertions, Erin Hopkins wrote, "progressive education's main goal was practical relevance. Two main components of progressive education are learning by doing so that understanding and meaning can take place and advancing social responsibility and democracy."<sup>110</sup> Therefore, Dewey believed that students learned best through experience, "a philosophy of education based upon a philosophy of experience."<sup>111</sup> Purpose, which is a manifestation of learning, is the physical act of direct engagement with the subject, content, project, or problem to produce a meaningful outcome. Dewey wrote, "the organic connection between education and personal experience; or the new philosophy of education is committed to some kind of empirical and experimental philosophy."<sup>112</sup> As the students began to act upon their learning, they began to experience meaningful results to their actions. Furthermore, Dewey claimed, "Experience does not go on simply inside a person. It does go on there, for it influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose. But this is not the whole of the story. Every genuine experience has an active side which changes to some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had."<sup>113</sup> The educational theory of experiential learning captivates students as learning is activated through the many facets of their experiences. Therefore, learning through experience opens wide the door of possibilities for deeper, authentic, and even more meaningful

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>110</sup> Erin A. Hopkins, "John Dewey and Progressive Education," *The Journal of Educational Thought* 50, no. 1 (Winter 2017): [Page #], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372390?seq=1>.

<sup>111</sup> Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 29.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 39.

learning.

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey communicated the importance of the student's educational experience informing a desire to be a lifelong learner. Dewey's philosophy of education articulated in this book captures the concept of learning that endures over the course of a lifetime. The notion of enduring learning commences through inquiry and authentic experiences and, ultimately, produces a positive impact on the society as a whole. Dewey wrote, "Infancy, youth, adult life, - all stand on the same educative level in the sense that what is really learned at any and every stage of experience constitutes the value of that experience, and in the sense that it is the chief business of life at every point to make living thus contribute to an enrichment of its own perceptible meaning."<sup>114</sup> As students learn through experience, the natural manifestation of enduring learning and the influence can be identified in career choices as well in civic participation as young people mature into contributing citizens within a society.

Chapter Eleven of *Experience and Thinking* unpacks the nature of experience as well as the idea of a reflective experience. Dewey wrote, "Two conclusions important for education follow. 1. Experience is primarily an active-passive affair; it is not primarily cognitive. 2. But the measure of the value of an experience lies in the perception of relationships or continuities to which it leads up."<sup>115</sup> These two conclusions reached by Dewey can further explain the learning experiences and outcomes of students involved in an action based response to what they have learned through experience.

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<sup>114</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An introduction to the philosophy of education* (n.p.: Unbridged Classical Reprint, 1916), 48.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

Additionally, John Dewey's 6 Steps to Reflective Thinking provides a path forward for any educator seeking to engage students in experiential and problem based learning concepts. Dewey believed that the six steps to solving a problem include: Define the Problem, Establish Criteria (standards by which the solution will be judged), Analyze the Problem, Suggest Possible Solutions, Evaluate Each Solution and Select The Best One, Suggest Ways of Testing or Carry Out the Solution.<sup>116</sup> The six steps outlined here provide a clear and distinct blueprint for educators. A teacher or student can identify a problem within society and then propose solutions and answers by adhering to Dewey's Reflective Thinking process and following it step by step. John Dewey's six steps of Reflective Thinking ultimately validates the methods in which teachers and students can apply to their analysis of a global issue and proposed solutions to it.

Dewey and Freire, both articulate solutions to apathetic, compliant, and passive learning validate the concept of student empowerment as the anecdote. Freire believed that students should be empowered to be teachers and teachers should become students. Dewey believed that students should experience their learning through active authenticity where they deeply engage in learning. The outcome of these pedagogical philosophies allow the curriculum to come alive and inspire meaningful learning that endures throughout a lifetime. In his 2016 research article "The Power of Student Empowerment: Measuring Classroom Predictors and Individual Indicators," Chris Michael Kirk wrote, "Building on Freire's work, the purpose of this study was to explore the construct of student empowerment and identify both environmental factors that predict increased empowerment in students and outcomes associated with an interpersonal sense of

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<sup>116</sup> John Dewey, *How We Think*, reprint ed. (n.p.: Dover Publications, 1997).



empowerment.”<sup>117</sup> Kirk’s findings validated the solutions proposed here and affirm the educational philosophy of student empowerment as described by Dewey and Freire. Kirk found, “The present study demonstrated that student empowerment is highly related to a variety of academic and behavioral indicators of interest. Empowered students were less likely to skip class and get in trouble. They reported higher grades (one half letter grade), greater participation in extracurricular activities, and higher expectations for future education (one level of education).”<sup>118</sup> The research conclusions of Kirk and his team reinforce the qualitative research of this dissertation as the empowerment of students is at the heart of this work.

The solution to the lack of engagement is student empowerment, to inspire students to own their learning and productively act upon what they have experienced. A relevant instructional model of empowering students to solve a societal conflict or problem is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). YPAR began at the University of California-Berkeley, School of Public Health in partnership with San Francisco Peer Resources. According to the YPAR HUB website, the mission of:

YPAR is an innovative approach to positive youth and community development in which young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them. YPAR is a cyclical process of learning and action – research is done not just for the sake of it but to inform solutions to problems that young people themselves care about.<sup>119</sup>

The influence of John Dewey and Paulo Freire echo throughout the philosophy and pedagogy of YPAR as students are empowered by what they have learned to solve

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<sup>117</sup> Chris Michael Kirk, "The Power of Student Empowerment: Measuring classroom predictors and individual indicators," *The Journal of Educational Research* 109, no. 6 (2016): 589.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 593.

<sup>119</sup> YPAR, "What is YPAR?," YPAR Hub, last modified 2015, accessed July 6, 2021, <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/learn-about-ypar/>.

problems and propose solutions to societal issues facing themselves and their generation.

The majority of scholarship supporting YPAR is written and communicated by Emily J. Ozer, Ph.D., a Community Health Sciences professor at the University of California-Berkeley. Two articles authored by Dr. Ozer will be read, consulted, and serve as an influence on this dissertation. First, an article authored by Ozer, E.J., Ritterman & Wanis in 2010 titled, "Participatory Action Research (PAR) in middle school: Opportunities, constraints, and key processes" was published in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*. In this article, the authors examined the characteristics of middle school students in particular in relation to their age demographic and their motivation to participate in action research. Additionally, this article provides valuable connections to the students of Project Stay Gold who participated in action research while in middle school, which ultimately led them to found a nonprofit organization.

Second, an article she co-authored with Douglas, L. in 2013 titled, "The Impact of participatory research on urban teens: An experimental evaluation" published in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 5. This article particularly highlights the research conducted of urban teens who participated in action research. The article revealed the linkage between participatory action research with an improvement in student's skills, motivation, and behavior.<sup>120</sup>

The YPAR research provides concrete examples of young people taking meaningful action within their communities to solve problems and address pertinent issues. There are many similarities between YPAR and the experiential, action inspired

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<sup>120</sup> Emily J. Ozer and Laura Douglas, "The impact of participatory research on urban teens: An experimental evaluation," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 51, no. 1 (August 2012): 1-11.

learning encountered by the students of Project Stay Gold. Some of the similarities that will be examined are the role of the compelling question to spark inquiry, research based strategies, young people empowered to leadership positions, and the action steps taken in proposing solutions to societal issues.

The objective of this dissertation is to explore how Action Inspired Learning can be an essential solution to a passive, compliant, and mundane social studies educational experience. With many common denominators to YPAR, Action Inspired Learning seeks to empower young people to do something substantial, influential, and rewarding with their educational experience. Students are inspired to take action when they discover a passion for a human rights issue or a societal injustice. Passion is fostered through empathy for others who are suffering an injustice; passion and empathy motivate students to possess agency over their response as they do something to intervene and make a difference in the lives and situations of others. As students use their talents and their voices through various forms of media, art, and communication to raise awareness, propose solutions, and solve problems they are experiencing learning that has motivated them to take action.

Education has the power to liberate oppressive forms of societal barriers and social obstacles for an individual. Liberatory pedagogy articulated by Paulo Freire has both a figurative and literal connotation when analyzing the role education plays within society.<sup>121</sup> Education has the literal power to liberate an individual from a life of poverty, illiteracy, and oppression. For example, in his 1845 slave narrative, Frederick Douglass

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<sup>121</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 83-86.

profoundly acknowledged that once an individual learns to read, they are forever free.<sup>122</sup> When Douglass learned how to read, he saw himself as a free man, ultimately paving the way to his true freedom once he arrived in the northern region of the United States. Freire believed the same was possible within his home country of Brazil; education had the power to lift individuals out of impoverished circumstances by providing individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to improve their lives.

The “banking concept” of education promotes a figurative oppression inside of classrooms across the nation. Within this system, students are passive, static learners, as they sit, listen, and contain the “deposits” entrusted to them by their teacher. Students are not trusted to operate with agency in the learning process. Freire defined “problem-posing education” as the answer to the oppressive banking education model, since it empowers students to be at the center of their learning by possessing agency to assume leadership roles to ultimately determine the path of learning.<sup>123</sup> When students are trusted with agency to own and lead their learning, they become valued stakeholders in the learning experience. In their article, *Reinventing Freire in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, professors Tara Bartlett and Daniel Schugurensky wrote:

Inspired by Freire’s ideas and work, one way to address the ails of citizenship education is to develop an ecosystem that connects citizenship education, civic engagement, and school democracy. Such an ecosystem would create a variety of democratic learning opportunities that provide students with authentic engagements in civic action and lay the groundwork for a participatory readiness through project-based learning, experiential citizenship education, and active participation in self-governance.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave*, third ed. (Leeds, UK: Wortley, 1846).

<sup>123</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>124</sup> Tara Bartlett and Daniel Schugurensky, “Reinventing Freire in the 21st Century: Citizenship education, Student Voice and School Participatory Budgeting,” *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 23, no. 2 (2021): 58 & 59.

History classrooms can be an ideal environment to cultivate the ecosystem of which Bartlett and Schugurensky speak, where citizenship, student engagement, and democracy connect and foster an environment for students to have the freedom to be at the center of the process, learning through authentic experiences. This type of authenticity within learning is nonexistent within Freire's "banking concept" as well as the traditional forms of education Dewey argued against. Therefore, the "banking concept" should be replaced with an inquiry-based learning instructional approach where students are inspired to discover through research and authentic experiences solutions and answers to current problems and global issues. Action Inspired Learning is a framework for educators to create an ecosystem inside of a school or classroom where students and teachers collectively connect learning with authentic opportunities to experience new concepts and discover relevant information ultimately linking back to the curriculum. Action Inspired Learning motivates students to participate in experiential learning through passion, empathy, and agency. This cyclical nature of Action Inspired Learning ensures that students experience learning that empowers, learning that is full of purpose, and learning that endures over the course of a lifetime.

### CHAPTER 3

#### A TEACHABLE MOMENT: CASE STUDY

The early afternoon of Tuesday, July 23, 2013, New Jersey Senator Jeffrey Chiesa entered the United States Senate chamber to deliver his first speech as a U. S. Senator; this is also known as a maiden speech. As Senator Chiesa began his speech, I sat in the gallery of the Senate chamber with five students who had just completed their freshmen and sophomore years of high school. As the Attorney General for the State of New Jersey, Chiesa made combatting human trafficking a priority of law enforcement throughout the state. My students and I had developed a working relationship with him during the previous year to raise awareness about human trafficking throughout New Jersey. We had met with the Attorney General four times before he was appointed to fill the vacated New Jersey Senate seat in June of 2013. In the introduction of his maiden speech Senator Chiesa (2013) communicated:

Today I wish to use this great honor to help give voice to the shockingly large and largely unseen group of people who have no voice of their own. The United Nations estimates there are upwards of 27 million of them around the globe. There are believed to be at least 100,000 of them here in the United States. They are among the most exploited, abused, and neglected people on the face of the Earth. They are the victims of human trafficking. They are, to be more direct, modern-day slaves.<sup>125</sup>

The rest of his speech outlined his plan as an interim Senator to utilize the authority of his office to propose legal solutions and further raise awareness about the gruesome reality of human trafficking.

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<sup>125</sup> Senator Jeffrey Chiesa, Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 113th Congress, First Session, S. Doc. No. 113-106, First, at S5818-S5819 (July 23, 2013).

Sitting in the balcony of the United States Senate, my students and I felt a collective sense of awe and accomplishment as we listened to a U.S. Senator deliver a detailed and compelling speech about an issue in which we were deeply invested. As the speech continued, we were not prepared for how the senator concluded. Senator Chiesa communicated:

One of the more inspiring efforts has been initiated by a group of middle and high school students from my State. In 2010, under the guidance of Dan Papa, an extraordinary social studies teacher, students at the Jefferson Township Middle School in Jefferson Township, New Jersey formed an organization called Project Stay Gold. The students participating Project Stay Gold have created a website, pieces of art, and launched an innovative mobile project to raise and spread awareness of human trafficking. The students and their teacher have set some ambitious goals for their work. One of those goals is to enlist the help of the NFL to raise awareness of human trafficking in advance of Super Bowl 48. As a New Jersey, that is a goal I share.<sup>126</sup>

As a history teacher I have lived by the motto, “We learn history to make history,” consistently sharing this ideal with my students. Humbled by the words of Senator Chiesa, I looked at the student seated next to me and said, “We made history.” This moment, shrouded in surrealism, validated the inspiring impact of these brave young people as their compassionate work was recognized by the most powerful lawmaking entity in the United States. Their accomplishments are forever engraved in the annals of the United States Senate as this speech is commemorated in the Congressional Record archives.

I first learned about human trafficking in 2005, two years before I began my teaching career. After spending an afternoon with Rob Morris, the founder of Love

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<sup>126</sup> Senator Jeffrey Chiesa, Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 113th Congress, First Session, S. Doc. No. 113-106, First, at S5818-S5819 (July 23, 2013).

146<sup>127</sup>, at his office in Connecticut, I was compelled to do my part in the eradication of this awful crime. Following that meeting, I invested time into researching the crime of human trafficking to further my own understanding of this escalating human rights violation which occurs in the shadows of societies around the world.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) defines “severe forms of trafficking in persons” as:

sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age; or the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.<sup>128</sup>

In every instance there must be evidence of force, fraud, or coercion for the purposes of exploitation for a case to be considered human trafficking. This global crime is often referred to as “modern day slavery” by governmental agencies, law enforcement, not for profit organizations and enlightened citizens around the world. According to The International Labour Organization released the Global Estimates of Modern Day Slavery report in 2017, “An estimated 40.3 million people were victims of modern slavery in 2016. In other words, on any given day in 2016, there were likely to be more than 40 million men, women, and children who were being forced to work against their will under threat or who were living in a forced marriage that they had not agreed to.”<sup>129</sup> Though there is debate surrounding the actual estimate of human trafficking victims, most every entity and organization agree that there are more slaves on planet earth today

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<sup>127</sup> “Love146 is an international human rights organization working to end child trafficking and exploitation through survivor care and prevention.” Vision taken from Love 146 website

<sup>128</sup> Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report, H.R. Rep., at 5/538 (June 2019).

<sup>129</sup> International Labour Office, comp., *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery* (Geneva, Switzerland, 2017), 9.



than at any other time in human history. Additionally, the report documents women and young girls consist of 71% of the 40.3 million people estimated to be trafficked worldwide and one in every four children are estimated victims.<sup>130</sup> The report does provide this disclaimer: “Due to limitations of the methodology and data, these estimates are considered to be conservative.”<sup>131</sup> Additionally, the report reveals a shocking statistic: “In the past five years, 89 million people experienced some form of modern slavery for periods of time ranging from a few days to the whole five years.”<sup>132</sup> The many facets of human trafficking include sex trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage, sexual exploitation of children, domestic servitude, and forced child labour.

Human Trafficking is the third largest crime in the world, behind drug and illegal weapons trafficking. The *2018 Global Trafficking in Persons Report* published by The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime documented a drastic increase of trafficking reports in 2016. The report states, “More victims of trafficking in persons were reported to UNODC in 2016 than at any time over the past 13 years.”<sup>133</sup> The increase of human trafficking throughout the world can be directly linked to the maximized profit by organized crime. For example, when a drug cartel sells and distributes narcotics, their profit is made once, and the drugs are gone. Organized crime around the world has awakened to the grim reality that once the weapon or drug is sold, they can only profit

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<sup>130</sup> International Labour Office, *Global Estimates*, 10

<sup>131</sup> International Labour Office, *Global Estimates*, 21

<sup>132</sup> International Labour Office, *Global Estimates*, 10

<sup>133</sup> United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, comp., *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* (n.p.: United Nations, 2018), 21.

UNODC has gathered data on victims of trafficking in persons detected since 2003, the year of entry into force of the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol (supplementing the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime). Over this period, UNODC has collected information on about 225,000 victims of trafficking detected worldwide. In 2016, a peak of more than 24,000 detected victims was recorded.

one time; however, a human being can be sold repeatedly seven days a week and 365 days of the year. According to the International Labour Organization, the global crime of human trafficking profits more than \$150 billion annually.<sup>134</sup>

Inside the United States, sex trafficking, forced labor, and the exploitation of children are generally the categories of human trafficking that receive the most of attention from the federal and state governments, law enforcement, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). *The U.S. Department of State 2019 Trafficking in Persons* report states, “During FY 2018, DOJ secured convictions against 526 traffickers, an increase from 499 convictions in FY 2017. Of these, 501 involved predominantly sex trafficking and 25 involved predominantly labor trafficking, compared to 471 and 28 in FY 2017, respectively.”<sup>135</sup> The crime of labor trafficking thrives in areas of American society that are common to everyday life, such as farming, trucking, mining, service, and manufacturing. Oftentimes, immigrants are either working to pay off a debt or long hours for little to no compensation on a farm, in a salon, or at a construction site.

Founded in 2002 in Washington DC, The Polaris Project is the leading non-governmental organization in the United States. In 2007 The Polaris Project successfully partnered with the federal government instituting the National Human Trafficking Hotline (888-373-7888). The National Hotline is monitored 24 hours a day in multiple languages and provides protection and resources for victims to report their claims. According to Polaris’ 2018 Statistics from the National Human Trafficking Hotline Report, “The National Hotline has handled 51,919 cases since 2007, comprising one of

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<sup>134</sup> International Labour Office, *Global Estimates*, 10

<sup>135</sup> Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, H.R. Rep., at 493/538 (June 2019).

the largest publicly available data sets on human trafficking in the United States. These aggregated, anonymized data help illuminate otherwise hidden trends, risk factors, methods of control, and other variables that allow this crime to manifest across the country.”<sup>136</sup>

Young people from every walk of life across the nation are highly susceptible to the dangers of human trafficking. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children states:

While any child can be targeted by a trafficker, research has shown that traffickers often target children with increased vulnerabilities, including”: children who frequently run away (especially 3+ missing incidents), have experienced childhood sexual abuse, have experienced prior sexual assault or rape, significant substance abuse issues, or identify as LGBTQ and have been kicked out or who have been stigmatized by their family.<sup>137</sup>

Additionally, the data collected by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children reveals that child sex trafficking has been reported in all fifty states within the United States, and the average age child sex trafficking victims reported is 15 years old.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, the graph below from the Polaris Project’s 2018 Statistics gathered from the documented calls into the National Human Trafficking Hotline demonstrate the age of sex or labor trafficking victims within the United States.

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<sup>136</sup> Polaris Project, *2018 Statistics from the National Human Trafficking Hotline*, 1, March 2019, accessed April 1, 2020, [https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/Polaris\\_National\\_Hotline\\_2018\\_Statistics\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/Polaris_National_Hotline_2018_Statistics_Fact_Sheet.pdf).

<sup>137</sup> National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, "The Issues: Child Sex Trafficking," National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, last modified 2020, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.missingkids.org/home>.

<sup>138</sup> National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, "The Issues," National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

The recruitment process of young victims is clearly defined in the United States Department of Education report titled, *Human Trafficking in America's Schools*, which states, "Traffickers, who may be male, female, or transgender, target vulnerable children and lure them into forced labor and prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation. In fact, it is known that the vast majority of child victims in the commercial sex industry and in forced labor are recruited and controlled by traffickers."<sup>139</sup> Throughout the United States young people are recruited in malls, schools, and public events. To explain how young people throughout the nation are introduced and groomed into trafficking situations, it is imperative to understand these perspectives from the lens of a survivor. Holly Austin Smith, a survivor of child sex trafficking, documents her story in an interview with Global Journalist; she states:

It was the summer between eighth grade and my freshmen year...so I was really stressed out about the transition between middle school and high-school so it was a tough time for me. I was depressed. I was worried about losing my friends. I was worried about being beat up in high school. I was worried about finding a real boyfriend. So, like many young teenagers, I had a lot on my mind and I was a kind of freaking out. I met somebody, at the local shopping mall. I was actually there with a group of friends and I noticed him watching me and he called me over to him, and so I walked over and exchanged phone numbers, and that was it. It didn't seem like a big scary thing because that was a quick exchange between us. And then we talked on the phone for about two weeks – mainly overnight. he said things to me that made me feel good about myself like I was pretty enough to be a model, I was too mature for high school, those things, you know, that made me feel really good, that was what every teenager wants to hear. And he also painted this picture of this sort of glamor lifestyle that he led. He said that he traveled across the country and went to a lot of dance clubs and hung out with famous people. After two weeks of talking [he asked] if I wanted to run away and skip out of high school—he could give me a real job and I could go to all these famous dance clubs with him. So I decided to run away and I met him at a different shopping mall and he bought a pair of red high heel shoes. I thought that he was buying them because we were going to a dance club that night. He took me to a motel room and left me with [a] woman who got me ready. She put makeup on my face, put a dress on me and [did] my hair. Again, I thought we

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<sup>139</sup> U.S. Department of Education, comp., *Human Trafficking in America's Schools* (Washington D.C.: Department of Education, 2015), 6.

were going out that night. And when he came back, he started going over what he called “the rules.” Then it became very clear to me that he was talking about prostitution. And so, within just hours of running away from home, I was coerced into prostitution in Atlantic City, New Jersey. And the first man that I was sold to in Atlantic City was for 200 dollars, and he said that I reminded him of his granddaughter.<sup>140</sup>

Mrs. Smith’s story is similar to many young men and women across the nation who have fallen prey to predators and traffickers through an initial contact which was followed up by a grooming process.

The unprecedented impact of the Internet on global society over the past twenty-five years has forever transformed the landscape of civilization. With all of the positive contributions the Internet provides to daily life, unfortunately, it can expose a dark side of humanity by becoming an arena that facilitates exploitation. Extensive research has been conducted by the non-profit organization Thorn, who partner with technology companies to eliminate the sexual exploitation of children from the Internet. Surveying 260 survivors of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), Thorn discovered that technology was the primary contributor to the initial contact and the genesis of the grooming process for the participants in the study. The results of the January 2018 Survivor Insights: *The Role of Technology in Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking* report found, “Respondents who entered the life in 2015 noted much higher uses of technology in this process. Across the sample, 84% reported meeting their trafficker for the first time face to face, but only 45% of those entering the life in 2015 reported meeting their trafficker face to face. The

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<sup>140</sup> Laura Welfringer, "Recovering from a Childhood Interrupted by Trafficking," *Global Journalist* (blog), entry posted October 16, 2014, accessed April 12, 2020, <https://globaljournalist.org/2014/10/qa-holly-austin-smith/>.

remaining 55% reported use of text, website, or app.”<sup>141</sup> Additionally, the survey found the median age for entering the life of a victim to human trafficking was 14 years old. This corroborates other research on DMST showing that the average age of entry into commercial sexual exploitation is roughly 12 to 14 years old. While the most frequently reported age of entry into the life was 15, one in six participants reported being trafficked before the age of 12.<sup>142</sup> Traffickers engage young, vulnerable children through social media, dating apps, online video games, and chat rooms to make the initial connection with the underlying goal of meeting in person. The grooming process implores the evil tactics of mind manipulation, emotional coercion, and, at times, the use of drugs and alcohol. Traffickers know how to insert control to force the young person to engage in various forms of exploitation.

Moving beyond the traffickers’ ability to establish their initial contact and make a connection with a minor through the use of technology, they resort to even more sinister tactics to manipulate and coerce. Sextortion is defined, “as threats to expose a sexual image in order to make a person do something or for other reasons, such as revenge or humiliation.”<sup>143</sup> The 2016 Sextortion report compiled by Thorn in collaboration with Crimes Against Children Research Center at The University of New Hampshire provides examples of sextortion from survivors. The first example is a 16-year-old female, “A guy in his twenties told me that he loved me to get me to send him pictures of me nude. After

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<sup>141</sup> Thorn and Vanessa Bouche, comps., *Survivor Insights: The Role of Technology in Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*, 3, January 2018, accessed April 16, 2020, [https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Thorn\\_Survivor\\_Insights\\_DMST\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Thorn_Survivor_Insights_DMST_Executive_Summary.pdf).

<sup>142</sup> Thorn and Bouche, *Survivor Insights*, 7.

<sup>143</sup> Janis Wolak, David Finkelhor, and Crimes Against Children Research Center University of New Hampshire, *Sextortion: Findings From a Survey of 1,631 Victims*, 5, June 2016, accessed April 16, 2020, [https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Sextortion\\_Report.pdf](https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Sextortion_Report.pdf).

I didn't want to continue sending pictures, he threatened to create a Facebook page with my nudes."<sup>144</sup> The next example is a 14 year old male:

He messaged me, flirting with me. The boy in his profile picture was really hot, so I flirted back. Eventually I sent him nudes. An hour passed without a response from him, and then he revealed he was nothing he claimed to be. I asked him what he wanted and he said he wanted [sexual] favors. I told him to leave me alone and blocked him. He knew about another account I had however, and sent me more threats there... including an address to a motel near my house.<sup>145</sup>

Students across the nation possess some form of technology such as a mobile phone, tablet, or a computer. Each form of technology increases a child's susceptibility to interact with a predator or trafficker while playing an online video game, conversing in a chatroom, or making connections through social media apps. Traffickers know how to identify vulnerable children through an analysis of what is posted on social media or the words communicated during the initial contact. For example, if a young person states that they are bored, lonely, or depressed, the predator quickly identifies the direction they will move the conversation. The end goal of all online communication is to build a relationship that leads to the point where a physical meeting location is agreed upon and the two meet in person. Once that occurs, the trafficker will exploit the child through the use of force, fraud, or coercion. It is for this reason that awareness campaigns and prevention strategies must be focused on educating young people about the risk factors and warning signs to further ensure their safety in all forms of communication and interaction with individuals.

The origins of Project Stay Gold can be traced to a Friday morning in October 2010. I prepared to teach a lesson on the introduction of African slaves to the Jamestown

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<sup>144</sup> Thorn and Bouche, *Survivor Insights*, 11.

<sup>145</sup> Thorn and Bouche, *Survivor Insights*, 11.

colony in 1619 as a Dutch warship delivered the human cargo to work the rough tobacco fields. On that day, the 8th grade United States history lesson opened with an inquiry-based question prompt: “Does slavery still exist today?” Surprised and completely taken back by even the thought of slavery’s existence, the students overwhelmingly responded with a collective “no!” Toward the end of the lesson, I revisited the opening question of the lesson. Using the interactive whiteboard in the classroom, I walked the class through the Love146.org interactive website to demonstrate the existence of modern day slavery. We briefly compared their initial understanding of slavery as people stripped of their rights and held against their will with the stories of people living our current world under the same conditions.

As the bell rang and the students filed out of the classroom, student #4 in my first period class, approached me and inquired about the website to which I referred during the lesson. I responded with the website address as they walked out of the classroom. After the weekend to process the lesson, student #4 approached me on Monday morning stating that they had spent time over the weekend studying the human trafficking information on the website. They described their feelings about what they learned, in response, they looked at me and said, “Mr. Papa, we have to do something about this!” I asked what they had in mind, and responded that they wanted to recruit their friends to brainstorm some ideas about raising awareness within the school community. Student #4 and their friends were in a class for gifted and talented students called Gateways, which met during the opposite period from their lunch. Student #4 brought the idea of raising awareness about human trafficking to her Gateways teacher, and the teacher fully embraced the idea of the students researching the issue. In addition to the Gateways program during the



school day, a group of twenty-five students met after school to research the issue of human trafficking and to develop plans to raise awareness in our middle school.

From October 2010 to March 2011 the students collaborated to plan a human trafficking awareness week for our middle school community. The students decided to create a forty-five-minute lesson to teach the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade social studies classes about modern-day slavery. The students designed an interactive presentation with question prompts to engage their peers in learning about the issue. In addition to teaching lessons, the students created awareness posters and displayed them in the hallways of the middle school with statistics, facts, and quotes. The school administration allowed the students to give a fact or statistic each day of the awareness week during morning announcements. Additionally, to further spread the awareness message we designed colorful wristbands that stated **ABOLITIONIST** in bold white letters. The wristbands served the purpose of a conversation starter between the students and their friends and family about the issue of modern slavery. The students sold more than six hundred wristbands and raised more than \$600 to send to Love146; the organization that was responsible for first educating the group about the horrific crime.

As the students returned from teaching the lessons to their peers, they were elated with positive emotions and communicated the successes of their experience. I will never forget the contagious passion that filled their eyes as they began to dream about and plan for raising awareness in schools beyond our own. Following the highly successful awareness week, the students were determined to not allow their passionate flame fueled by empathy to dissipate. The students communicated to me that they desired to do more and decided that we should continue to meet through the duration of the school year.

Continuing to meet after school, we determined that we should name our newly founded club. My initial thought was to connect our work with something related to the eighth grade curriculum, so we began to brainstorm ideas from American history. One student mentioned they were reading *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton in English language arts class. When prompted about what in particular stood out in the story, a student recounted the class discussion about the phrase from the book, “Stay gold, Pony boy.”<sup>146</sup> Additionally, the phrase “stay gold” is a reference to a poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay” by Robert Frost. The students admired the phrase “stay gold” as they believed the message was to stay true to oneself, young, precious, and innocent; this was the message they wanted to communicate to their generation. From that meeting onward, we called our work Project Stay Gold (PSG).

Following the lead of my students, we began working on a promotional video to communicate the purpose of Project Stay Gold. We wrote a grant and hired a professional videographer to film a short video. The students wrote the script and collaborated with the producer on the different scenes, offering ideas and suggestions. The very first PSG video, titled “A Student Movement to Abolish Modern-Day Slavery,” featured more than fifteen students and was filmed on a Friday afternoon in May of 2011. Inspired to make the connection between what they learned in history class with the work of eradicating modern slavery, the students revealed their influences throughout the visual introduction. The video begins with a Frederick Douglass quote, “I expose slavery in this country, because to expose it is to kill it.”<sup>147</sup> Throughout the three minute video, the students

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<sup>146</sup> S.E. Hinton, *The Outsiders* (n.p.: Viking Press, 1967).

<sup>147</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, NY: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 418.

passionately articulated information about modern-day slavery. The video concluded with the students repeatedly communicating, “I am an abolitionist.” The students decided to follow the blueprint of the nineteenth century abolitionists who bravely confronted the atrocity of human slavery in their day; they were to become modern day abolitionists. Applying what they learned from their history class and formative research the students established the foundation to accomplish something special.

Throughout the summer of 2011, we began building a website and engaged in the planning process of creating additional videos with the objective of empowering students in other school communities with the awareness message. In October of 2011 we filmed three videos, “What is Human Trafficking,” “Risk Their Lives,” and “Five Things You Can Do to Make a Difference”. The students turned their attention to planning an awareness evening for our community on a Friday night in December of 2011. The students prepared their speeches and designed art for awareness; one student wrote a song for the victims of human trafficking and sang it with such passion and conviction. One of the purposes of the evening was to launch the new website as well as premiere the videos we filmed. Much to our surprise, more than two hundred people attended in support of the students. Additionally, we invited a speaker from ECPAT USA (an anti-trafficking organization based in NYC) and Kathy Friess from the New Jersey Attorney General’s office. Both speakers added validity to the message the students communicated throughout the evening. At the end of the evening, Mrs. Friess asked if the students would be interested in presenting at the Attorney General’s first annual Human Trafficking Awareness Day in Trenton on Wednesday, January 11th. In 2010, President

Barack Obama had designated January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month.<sup>148</sup>

The students gladly accepted the invitation and prepared for the presentation. We arrived at the State House Annex on West State Street in Trenton, New Jersey on the morning of Wednesday, January 11th. After moving more than twenty students and teachers through security, we entered the room, which was full to capacity. The students delivered their speeches, presented their videos, sang a few songs all before an audience of law enforcement, members of the Attorney General's office, leaders of statewide agencies and nonprofits, as well as concerned citizens. Sitting in the front row of the presentation was Attorney General Jeff Chiesa; it was his first day on the job. At the conclusion of the awareness event, Mr. Chiesa approached me and expressed the impression the students had made on him and extended an invitation to his office for later that spring. The Human Trafficking Awareness event in Trenton opened many opportunities for the students to spread their message as they were invited to speak at numerous government functions, local middle and high schools, religious gatherings, and community events.

On June 5, 2012 Attorney General Jeff Chiesa visited our middle school and spent an hour speaking with the Project Stay Gold students about their prevention strategies and future goals. Less than two weeks later, we were invited to the Richard J Hughes Justice Complex on June 15, 2012 to meet with Attorney General Jeff Chiesa in his Trenton office. Over breakfast he asked the students to share more information with him

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<sup>148</sup> Department of Justice, "Reflecting on National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month," The United States Department of Justice Archives, accessed 2010, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/reflecting-national-slavery-and-human-trafficking-prevention-month>.

about their work to raise awareness of human trafficking by using education as a means of prevention. Additionally, he shared a few strategies he was imploring as the top law enforcement officer in the State of New Jersey to combat human trafficking. The students discussed their concerns about Super Bowl Forty-Eight taking place in East Rutherford, New Jersey in early 2014. By this time the students began planning their “Not On Our Turf” campaign to raise awareness around the Super Bowl, since previous host cities reported a major spike in reported human trafficking cases. Attorney General Chiesa expressed a mutual interest in collaborating to make the presence of the Super Bowl in New Jersey as well. In July 2012, Attorney General Chiesa issued a Law Enforcement Directive for investigation of human trafficking in New Jersey. The General Policy of the Directive states:

It shall be the law enforcement policy of this State to fully and fairly investigate and prosecute violations of [New Jersey’s Criminal Human Trafficking Statute] with a view toward deterring human trafficking violations to the greatest extent possible. All law enforcement agencies and officers shall be required: to promptly and thoroughly investigate possible violations of human trafficking; to keep State and county prosecution authorities apprised of human trafficking investigations to ensure that all investigative leads are pursued as appropriate, and to make certain that all investigations are properly coordinated; to protect the immediate safety and security of human trafficking victims, and to respect and safeguard the rights of these victims.<sup>149</sup>

The Attorney General’s office shared a copy of the Directive that summer and asked me to share it with my students in September.

In the fall of 2012, Project Stay Gold met weekly after school to continue crafting their message as they planned and prepared for future events and awareness campaigns.

One event in particular was the Health & Human Services Region II Training Institute on

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<sup>149</sup> Jeffrey S. Chiesa, "Attorney General Law Enforcement Directive NO. 2012-2 (Investigation of Human Trafficking)," news release, July 2012, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://www.nj.gov/oag/newsreleases12/AG-Human-Trafficking-Directive.pdf>.

Human Trafficking Prevention on October 17, 2012 in New York City. Once again, the students presented their solutions to the global epidemic of human trafficking as they boldly advocated for education as a preventative solution. Each student that spoke began their speech with their name followed by, “I am an abolitionist.” The audience was astonished to witness a group of high school students speak with such fluency and authority about an issue as complex as human trafficking. Following the presentation, the students were able to network with a number of important dignitaries and government officials which led to many more opportunities for Project Stay Gold to advance the cause of a student movement to abolish modern-day slavery.

Project Stay Gold was invited once again to participate in the Attorney General’s 2nd Annual Human Trafficking Awareness Day at the State House in Trenton on Friday, January 11th. In his remarks, Attorney General Jeff Chiesa praised the students for their presentation as well as their passion to abolish modern-day slavery. At the conclusion of the event, we scheduled a second visit to his office in Trenton to further discuss our “Not On Our Turf: Students for a traffick-free Super Bowl” campaign. On February 20, 2013 we arrived, once again, at the Richard J Hughes Justice Complex to meet with Attorney General Jeff Chiesa; however, this time we had 18 students and three adult advisors. Seated at a long conference table, the students dressed in suits, discussed their thoughts, ideas, and plans for a traffick-free Super Bowl in New Jersey with the top law enforcement officer in the state. Attorney General Chiesa listened intently to each student and discussed strategies for collaboration moving forward throughout the year. Many students at the table that afternoon had aspirations of pursuing careers as lawyers, policy makers, or law enforcement officials; this meeting affirmed their desires and future

endeavors. Furthermore, we left that meeting with an optimistic sense that our Super Bowl campaign was headed in the right direction and assured that we would make an impact in our community. Nothing could prepare us for what was about to take place in just a few short months.

On June 3 2013, New Jersey Senator Frank Lautenberg passed away after serving five elected terms in the United States Senate. Three days later New Jersey Governor, Chris Christie appointed Attorney General Jeff Chiesa to fill the vacant Senate seat until the special election in October 2013. On Thursday, July 18, 2013, I received a phone from Senator Jeff Chiesa's office in Washington D.C. with an invitation to attend his maiden speech on Tuesday, July 23 at his request. Humbled by the opportunity, I quickly accepted the invitation and contacted a few students. We arrived at the Russell Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill at 10:00am on July 23. For four of the students who attended this special meeting; this was the first time they visited Washington D.C., and they truly received a visit of a lifetime. After a brief meeting with Senator Chiesa, his staffer led us on a tour of Capitol Hill that included transportation on the Capitol Subway System and a guided tour of the Capitol Building. We eventually made our way to the balcony of the United States Senate Chamber to listen to Senator Chiesa's speech. This was the first time any of us had attended a session of the US Senate. Senator Chiesa delivered a fourteen-minute speech outlining his vision for the next four months of his interim position. When he mentioned Project Stay Gold, we became utterly speechless and were amazed that our work was spoken about in the United States Senate. With tears in my eyes, I looked at the students and will never forget the expression on their faces. Never have I felt such a sense of accomplishment as well as pride in the students I was

lucky to teach. Following his speech, we met him outside of the Senate door and expressed our gratitude for his kindness and generosity.

Senator Chiesa requested to speak with us in his office before we left Washington to return home. As we met in his office he shared his vision for raising public awareness through New Jersey with the Super Bowl taking place in seven months. To our surprise, part of his plan included the students of Project Stay Gold. He invited students to speak alongside him in September and October at high school assemblies throughout New Jersey. Additionally, he requested that we work with his speech writer to create a presentation that would speak directly to young people. During the month of August, we designed a presentation for Senator Chiesa, which he used as a guide during his school assemblies. Six different students had the distinct opportunity to speak alongside Senator Chiesa at high schools throughout New Jersey.

In late August 2013, I received an invitation from Senator Chiesa's office to testify at a panel discussion hosted by the United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs titled "Combatting Human Trafficking: Federal, State, and Local Perspectives" in Washington, D.C. on September 23, 2013. Senator Chiesa initiated the hearing to further inform the Senate about the topic of human trafficking. The objective of the hearing was for the Senate to inquire about the reasons for the emergence of trafficking throughout the United States and what they, as the United States Senate, could do to combat the crime. I arrived at the Senator's office in the morning and met with him to discuss the hearing and the testimony I prepared. At the conclusion of the meeting, Senator Chiesa's staff mentioned to me that it was a slow news day on Capitol Hill and for that reason, C-SPAN decided to televise the hearing live



on their network. Hearing this news, maximized my nervous energy even more than it already had been. As I sat in the Dirksen Senate Office Building hearing room, I felt incredibly humbled to have an opportunity to speak on behalf of these incredible young people that were making a difference in the lives of so many others, including my own. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would testify before the United States Senate, and here I sat just moments away. Following Senator Chiesa's gracious introduction, I provided a five-minute overview of Project Stay Gold which included the vision of my students to bring awareness and prevention strategies to schools throughout New Jersey and across the nation. Once the opening statements were complete, the Senators inquired with follow up questions. Senator Chiesa expressed that he believed the hearing was a success; I thanked him for the incredible opportunity to represent my outstanding students and traveled back to New Jersey.

The fall of 2013 was an extremely busy time with the Super Bowl invading New Jersey in just a few short months. Once again, the students' goal was to engage other students and schools throughout New Jersey. Essentially, if we could maximize our message by empowering students throughout New Jersey, the students believe that would amplify the message of abolition to communities across the state. On October 15, 2013 we hosted a "Not On Our Turf" Student Summit at Caldwell College. The summit was an enormous success with more than 30 schools represented and just over 300 hundred students and teachers in attendance. The summit consisted of a Human Trafficking 101 provided by Ellie Honig the New Jersey Director of Criminal Justice and a FBI agent who worked directly with human trafficking cases. The students then clearly communicated their innovative strategies to engage their school community in awareness

efforts about human trafficking and the Super Bowl. Each attendee received a toolkit filled with resources and materials to empower them to go back to their schools and start awareness campaigns. Overall, the student summit was a great success and far exceeded our expectations as we not only received positive feedback from the attendees, the students shared pictures and videos of their awareness campaigns within their school communities.

At the end of October, we filmed three public service announcements on our high school football field to communicate the awareness message of our: Not On Our Turf campaign. Once again, the students wrote the scripts and communicated their ideas to the producer we hired to film and edit the material. The videos were completed by early December and we promoted them through our social media platforms and sent them to schools across the state. The videos also caught the attention of local and state media outlets. Three weeks before the Super Bowl, *The Daily Record* newspaper covered the public service announcements with a story titled, “Human trafficking issues come to forefront as Super Bowl nears.” Additionally, the Sunday before the Super Bowl, *The Star Ledger* published an article titled, “Jersey teens tackle sexual exploitation: Jefferson students launch campaign.” At one point the article was on the front page of NJ.com with the title, “NJ Students speak out against Super Bowl sex trade.” Overall, between empowering students from more than thirty schools and receiving media attention, the students accomplished their objective of promoting an awareness campaign to bring awareness to the grim reality of the rise in human trafficking activity surrounding the Super Bowl. For all of their efforts and hard work, the students of Project Stay Gold received the New Jersey Educators Association Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Human Rights

award on January 18, 2014. The scope of their influence was just beginning to be seen throughout the state of New Jersey; their work became an exemplar for how young people could effectively engage the issue of human trafficking.

The student's anti-trafficking presentations at Human Trafficking Awareness Day at the State House in Trenton, New Jersey as well as their Not On Our Turf campaign caught the attention of a newly formed state-wide organization called The New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking (NJCAHT). As a result, the students and advisors of PSG developed a collaborative relationship the members of the Coalition and had the opportunity to establish connections with advocates, members of law enforcement, civic partners, and many citizens dedicated to the cause of preventing all forms of human trafficking. The NJCAHT supported the work of PSG by promoting their events and videos, inviting the students to participate in their monthly meetings, and establishing a platform to empower their efforts.

The 2014-2015 school year marked the final year of high school for founding members of Project Stay Gold. Determined to make the most of their senior year, the students decided the most effective way to maximize their influence throughout their community and beyond was to launch a campaign to inspire student-led PSG chapters in other school communities. The students decided to name the PSG chapters, "Anchors", for they envisioned anchoring an awareness campaign within a school. Throughout the first semester of the school year PSG developed an outreach strategy to engage students and teachers in surrounding school districts. The PSG students spent a few months collaborating to write a manual for interested schools to follow when starting a chapter. The PSG manual is a fourteen-page document that outlines the history of PSG, an

overview of human trafficking, and a comprehensive framework for schools to follow when establishing a PSG anchor. Once the materials were completed, the students decided to host a launch event for the PSG chapters. On April 15, 2015 PSG hosted “Anchors Aweigh” at the County College of Morris. Invitations were sent to schools and educators throughout the state of New Jersey, inviting them to participate in the event and learn how they too could further engage the issue of human trafficking prevention inside of their school. In addition to the students presenting how their efforts could be replicated, the event included speeches delivered by senior leaders from the NJCAHT, agents from the FBI and Homeland Security, and PSG advisors. Following this event, students throughout the state explored the beginning stages of founding their own awareness campaign within their school communities.

## **NEXT STEPS**

In July of 2015, I transitioned from a classroom teacher to an administrative position as a K-12 Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction for Social Studies, Fine Art, and Technology Education. As a supervisor I spent a great deal of time inside of many different classrooms as I was responsible for how students learned history from the teachers within the social studies department. Supervising history teachers greatly expanded my interest in effective instructional practices to engage students in learning history content in a meaningful and transformative manner. I found myself reflecting on the purposeful experiences of the PSG students in comparison to the students I was observing everyday inside of many different classrooms. Through observation I discovered many of the problematic challenges outlined in chapter one of this dissertation. The enduring learning experiences of the PSG students became clearer and

even more substantial as I observed students in multiple learning environments. This led me to want to further research the learning experiences of the Project Stay Gold students. Initially, I believe that these students possessed the solutions to the challenges outlined in chapter one and embodied how experiential learning transforms students into active learners who are transformed by their educational experiences. Therefore, for my research I interviewed sixteen Project Stay Gold students and asked them questions about their experiences while serving in the student-led project. My objective was to discover the impact of their participation in Project Stay Gold and whether and if so, how it influenced their college and career choices as well as their civic engagement as adults. Additionally, I asked the students to provide one lesson they learned from their experience in PSG. The methodology outlines how I facilitated the interviews and describes the participants involved.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **TESTING THE SOLUTION**

#### **DATA COLLECTION**

The qualitative research focused on the student's open-ended, unique responses to ten interview questions and their words will support the research behind Action Inspired Learning. The participants are my former middle and high school students who graduated from high school in either 2015 or 2016. The majority of the participants have graduated college as of May 2020. I contacted 18 former students in total; the participants range from the class of 2015 and the class of 2016. One participant graduated from high school in 2019. The participants were selected for the distinct and unique role they played in the formation of and participation in Project Stay Gold. Additionally, each participant contributed to the student movement through their participation in many Project Stay Gold events from 2011 to 2016. None of the participants are minors or members of any protected populations.

The quantitative aspect of the research encompassed 18 former students who were contacted through email during the first week of July, 2020 and were invited to participate in the survey. The Google Form survey was made available to each participant as they returned the signed IRB consent form. By the conclusion of the research survey on August 30, 2020, 16 students had returned the signed consent form and completed the ten questions in Google Forms. Of the 16 participants 8 are males and 8 are females. In total, the survey had an 89% participation rate. Question number 9 asked the participants to rate their experience in Project Stay Gold on a linear scale of 1 (no impact) to 10 (forever impacted). Every participant responded to the question with 11 participants

selecting 10, 4 participants selecting 9, and 1 participant selecting 6. The average response among the 16 participants is a 9.5 rating demonstrating the impact of their learning experience as students in Project Stay Gold.

Finally, please rate the impact your experience in Project Stay Gold has had on your life.  
18 responses

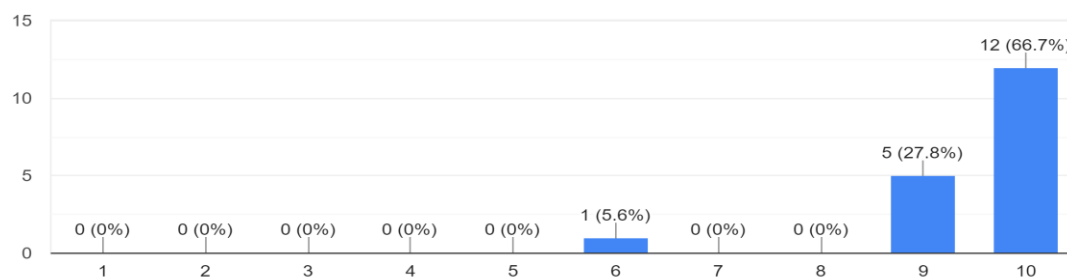


Figure 2 | Student responses to interview question #9.<sup>150</sup>

The research study included the following steps. First, the participants completed the short answer questions in the Google Form with as much detail as possible. Next, the participants submitted their responses upon completion. There was nothing required beyond the completion of the interview questions. The data collected will remain private and the identity of the participants will not be revealed or shared with anyone beside the researcher. The personal information of the participants will remain secure and private.

Each participant answered the following survey questions:

1. First & Last Name
2. Please reflect back to your time as a middle and high school student in Project Stay Gold. What initially motivated you to participate in the work of preventing human trafficking?
3. Describe your experience in Project Stay Gold as a student. What were some defining moments?
4. As a member of Project Stay Gold, what does the following phrase mean to you: "We learn history to make history"?
5. How did Project Stay Gold impact your college experience?

<sup>150</sup> Google forms interview by author.

6. How did Project Stay Gold have an influence on your career choices?
7. In what ways has your experience in Project Stay Gold influenced your civic participation as an adult?
8. If you could summarize one life lesson you learned from your involvement in Project Stay Gold, what would that lesson be?
9. Finally, please rate the impact your experience in Project Stay Gold has had on your life. (Students will rate from 1 to 10 on a linear scale)
10. Would you be willing to share any written work about PSG that was created as a student? If so, please paste the text here or attach it. Thank you.

The research was conducted through a Google Form where the participants were encouraged to complete the extended answer questions. Once the Google Form was completed the students did not have access to the results and the information is stored in a password protected Google account facilitated by Drew University. Each participant returned a signed consent form agreeing to the terms of the research study.

## **METHODS OF ANALYSIS**

As I describe the different features of Action Inspired Learning it is critical that the students' voices and perspectives are at the forefront of the evidence provided. The qualitative research methods integrated into this research analyze the open-ended question responses of each one of the 16 participants. The analysis conducted includes both thematic and discourse analysis.

Thematic analysis includes coding the participants' responses to identify themes and patterns that provide evidence for the learning experience. For example, when analyzing the power of empathy to motivate students to take action, I read through the student's interview responses as they incorporated words, such as "inspired," "motivated," and "amazed" when describing the decision to do more with the knowledge they gained. Furthermore, the coding of student responses additionally encompassed the analysis of similar phrases to describe empathy. Student #4 wrote, "This knowledge



added fuel to my motivation to do something.”<sup>151</sup> Student #3 describes empathy in this statement as, “human trafficking - which targets children around our same age.”<sup>152</sup> Student #8 states, “it was no longer a question of what abhorrent system was happening 200 years ago but rather what was happening in my backyard. With that in mind, I was inspired to act.”<sup>153</sup> Though the participants are different, their responses embody a similar definition of empathy in the context of their own personal experiences learning about human trafficking for the first time. There is a common theme threaded throughout multiple responses given by the participants, which demonstrate a common understanding of empathy and its role in their learning.

Discourse analysis identifies how a group of people speak about a topic or theme in the same social context. For this dissertation, I analyzed the participants' responses to find common language in a particular context to identify how they universally describe their experiences. Analyzing how Action Inspired Learning influenced their civic participation as an adult I identified the larger concepts and bigger picture they were communicating. Chapter Five includes a wide ranging analysis of the student responses as well as a synthesis of how the entirety of the student's perspectives define and shape Action Inspired Learning.

For example, reading through the participants' responses to question 7 which states, in what ways has your experience in Project Stay Gold influenced your civic participation as an adult? I analyzed the participants' responses and extracted these phrases that speak to the larger context of this particular question of influence on civic

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<sup>151</sup> Student # 4, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 6, 2020.

<sup>152</sup> Student # 3, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 5, 2020.

<sup>153</sup> Student # 8, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 17, 2020.

participation. Student #13 states, “It has made me more vocal about issues of injustice in our society like racism, police brutality, and xenophobia.”<sup>154</sup> Student #5 writes, “Through the presentations and demonstrations I did as a PSG member, I cultivated my voice as an activist. Now, my life does not feel fulfilled if I am not using my voice to create change and advocate for others.”<sup>155</sup> Student #16 states, “PSG has made me a more ‘conscious consumer’. We vote with our wallets to ‘reward’ the decisions that firms make.”<sup>156</sup> Student #7 writes, “PSG is what began my involvement in service. As previously mentioned I have done a lot with service throughout college. Everything I have done and learned has taught me deep empathy and completely opened my eyes to the injustices in the world around me.”<sup>157</sup> Student #8 states, “PSG has definitely influenced my civil participation as an adult! The whole organization focused around taking action and effecting change in the world around you.”<sup>158</sup> Overall, the student responses communicate directly to the research questions and embody a common theme of inspired service, civic engagement and active participation.

## **METHODOLOGICAL CONCLUSION**

The most effective way to understand the educational experience of Action Inspired Learning is to understand the perspectives of the students who were empowered by their learning and impacted by the experience. Their responses to the interview questions provide relevant insight into their viewpoint of their experience as they carefully reflect back on their learning and determine how they were influenced then as

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<sup>154</sup> Student #13, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>155</sup> Student #5, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>156</sup> Student #16, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>157</sup> Student # 7, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>158</sup> Student # 8, Google forms interview by the author.

students and impacted now as adults. The open-ended questions provide the participants the freedom and latitude to respond in any manner they determine. Since this dissertation is about how students learn, it is imperative that their voices are amplified throughout the research process and their responses are analyzed to provide evidence of and support for Action Inspired Learning. Overall, the participants shared valuable insights as they described their experiences and how those moments have shaped their lives and continue to define their perspectives on their role in society.

## CHAPTER 5

### ACTION INSPIRED LEARNING: THE SOLUTION

Following a fifteen-minute introduction lesson on modern day slavery, Student #4 approached me and wanted to learn more about the human rights issue. The student spent the weekend researching human trafficking and was so motivated by what was learned in class and discovered through research that on the following Monday the student approached me and said, “Mr. Papa, we have to do something about this.” As an eighth grade student, Student # 4 was poised and deeply inspired to take action after learning about the horrific crime perpetrated children and young people all throughout the world. The same is true for the rest of the students involved in Project Stay Gold; as young people learn about human trafficking, they are motivated and inspired to act upon the knowledge and understanding they gain. I believe this is the primary objective of a social studies educator: to inspire students through learning to do something with the knowledge they have gained to make a difference in the world around them in a positive and meaningful way. Therefore, Action Inspired Learning engages students in learning that is empowering, full of purpose, and endures over the course of a lifetime.

Over the past decade there has been a renewed focus on teacher assessment of student learning. The expectation is that assessment is incorporated throughout each lesson as the teacher determines if the particular lesson objective has been achieved or not. This can be seen in all of the teacher evaluation models adopted by school districts throughout the country. Even with the present emphasis on assessment to determine student learning in daily instruction, how can we genuinely achieve learning that endures for a lifetime? Will the knowledge and understanding gained through meeting the

learning objective impact a student for the rest of his or her life? Is the purpose of education to provide students with essential information to pass an exam or write a research paper to then quickly forget the content or lose the understanding of the skill over time? Should the primary goal of every educator be to provide students with experiences in learning that the knowledge and impressions persist in young people over the course of their lifetimes? In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey wrote, “Almost everyone has had occasion to look back upon his school days and wonder what has become of the knowledge he was supposed to have amassed during his years of schooling.”<sup>159</sup> To foster authentic learning that endures over the course of a lifetime, educators must think abstractly to create genuine experiences for students to learn as they take action to solve global issues, investigate through research, speak publicly about related issues, create nonprofit organizations, establish community relationships, and educate their peers and teachers about the topics and issues about which they are most passionate. In the case of Project Stay Gold, students organically discovered a passion to prevent all forms of human trafficking, and the learning they experienced produced a lasting impact and influence on their college, career, and civic participation choices following their middle and high school careers.

Student motivation to engage in learning is at the heart of the myriad of challenges faced by every educator. Motivating students to learn the skills and content within a particular curriculum can be a challenge; however, inspiring them to do something with what they have learned is increasingly ambitious. The Project Stay Gold case study clearly demonstrates the achievements of middle school students who made

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<sup>159</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 47.

the conscientious decision to take action when they were confronted with an emerging global problem. So, what motivated the middle school students of Project Stay Gold to learn more about human trafficking and then take bold and decisive action? The three attributes that inspire meaningful learning and significant action are passion, empathy, and agency.

## **PASSION**

I first learned about human trafficking two years before my teaching career began. From the moment I learned about the horrific crime, my heart was gripped, and I was deeply compelled to do something to make a difference. With that new found knowledge I decided to donate monthly to a nonprofit organization. As outlined in the Project Stay Gold case study, on that Friday morning in October 2010, I delivered the lesson on modern day slavery with passion and conviction. Through the experience of facilitating Project Stay Gold, I have discovered that passion is a contagious emotion which fuels authentic interest, unlocks deep insights, and opens new possibilities as its influence can be experienced in real and tangible ways. In her article “How Passionate Teaching Can Inspire Students,” Alyssa Malmquist found, “Research links passionate teaching directly to a student’s willingness to learn and experience new ideas.”<sup>160</sup> Andy Hargreaves emphasized, “the link between learning and education argues that all pedagogical approaches fail unless passion is created in the classroom.”<sup>161</sup> The passion I possessed for the issue of human trafficking quickly became an identifiable passion for the students

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<sup>160</sup> Alyssa Malmquist, "How Passionate Teaching Can Inspire Students," *Today's Learner* (blog), accessed November 19, 2020, <https://todayslearner.cengage.com/how-passionate-teaching-can-inspire-students/>.

<sup>161</sup> Andy Hargreaves, *Rethinking Educational Change with Heart and Mind* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997), 17.

who were inspired to join Project Stay Gold. Their passion was evident in every speech they delivered, every video they created, every lesson they taught, and every conversation in which they engaged. It was their passion that motivated them to use the power of education to raise awareness and advance preventative strategies to make a substantive difference in their community and beyond.

The passion fueled lesson about the issue of human trafficking inspired Student # 4, an 8th grade student, to inquire about more information on the issue. In the Action Inspired Learning interview, when asked what initially motivated them to participate in the work of preventing human trafficking, Student # 4 responded, “I was initially motivated to participate in human trafficking prevention work due to the experience that I had in Mr. Papa’s classroom.”<sup>162</sup> Student #12 responded to the same question by stating, “Mr. Papa’s desire and passion to make a difference in some way motivated me to be a part of something bigger than myself.”<sup>163</sup> Examining what motivates students to learn is evident in the students' responses; both students identify passion as a critical component that inspires an authentic and intrinsic motivation to do something substantial with the new knowledge of a compelling human rights issue they had acquired. The passion demonstrated for human trafficking awareness and prevention by the teacher inspired a desire in middle school students to investigate the issue further to propose solutions and strategies to make a difference.

In Action Inspired Learning, the teacher in the classroom models the characteristics and expectations of the learning environment. Therefore, if the teacher

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<sup>162</sup> Student # 4 , Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 6, 2020.

<sup>163</sup> Student # 12, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 27, 2020.

exhibits a passion for a topic, current event, human rights issue, or content, the students, in turn, will develop a new found interest as a result of the teacher's contagious posture.

In her article "Teaching with Passion," Jerelyn Thomas wrote:

Passionate teachers convey their passion to their students by acting as partners in learning, rather than as 'experts in the field.' As partners, they invite less-experienced learners to search for knowledge and insightful experiences. They build confidence and active competence in students who might otherwise sit back and watch the teacher do and say interesting things.<sup>164</sup>

Project Stay Gold demonstrates how a shared passion between students and teachers established a partnership to launch a nonprofit organization with the objective of making a real difference in the world around them. Passion marked the origins of Project Stay Gold and fueled the work of awareness, prevention, and education.

## **EMPATHY**

As a teacher, I observe a deeper level of student engagement in the classroom when teaching justice-themed lessons about topics such as the Holocaust, the Civil Rights movement, slavery, or human rights violations. Students uniformly respond with their undivided attention. Young people have a unique sensitivity to injustice, which is the foundation for empathy inside of a history classroom. Empathy is the emotional and intellectual ability to identify with the feelings, emotions, and plight of another individual.<sup>165</sup> Dr. Helen Riess wrote, "Empathy is best understood as a human capacity consisting of several different facets that work together to enable us to be moved by the plights and emotions of others."<sup>166</sup> Empathy is sometimes described as walking a mile in

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<sup>164</sup> Jerelyn Thomas, "Teaching with Passion," *Education Digest* 73, no. 3 (November 2007): 65.

<sup>165</sup> Merriam-Webster, "empathy (adj.)," accessed March 18, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>

<sup>166</sup> Helen Riess, *The Empathy Effect* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2018), 10.



someone else's shoes. In her book *Social Emotional Learning and the Brain*, Marilee Sprenger described the three different types of empathy: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and compassionate empathy.<sup>167</sup> Sprenger found, "Compassionate empathy, also called empathic concern, takes us beyond the first two types of understanding and sharing. With compassionate empathy, we are moved to action. We try to help."<sup>168</sup> As demonstrated in the Project Stay Gold case study, the role of compassionate empathy motivated middle school students to not only learn, but to take action in regards to fellow young people who are victimized by the crime of human trafficking.

The Action Inspired Learning interviews reveal the initial impressions experienced by the middle school students who were learning about how the crime of human trafficking directly affected children and young people all throughout the world.

Student #4 submitted this written excerpt with the interview responses:

After celebrating the holidays with my family, I decided to put some of my free time to good use. Still being shocked from my history class with Mr. Papa I did some extensive research on the topic of modern day slavery. I was, once again, amazed by the information I discovered. The fact that the average cost of a slave is ninety dollars, five-hundred women are trafficked through the city of Atlanta, Georgia every month, and one-hundred thousand people are trafficked through the United states annually, blew my mind. I could not wrap my head around the facts sitting before me. This knowledge added fuel to my motivation to do something about this injustice that continued to weigh on my mind.<sup>169</sup>

Student #4's response demonstrates the raw emotion experienced when confronted with the knowledge of the existence of an injustice in the world. The knowledge they refer to in this statement is an example of compassionate empathy as it directly connects their

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<sup>167</sup> Marilee Sprenger, *Social Emotional Learning and the Brain: Strategies to Help Your Students Thrive* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2020), 42.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 43

<sup>169</sup> Student # 4, interview by the author.

learning experience with the compelling inspiration to take action. Student #4 states, “this knowledge added fuel to my motivation to do something about this injustice.”<sup>170</sup>

Similarly, Student #3’s interview further confirms how empathy inspired deeper learning, “During that lesson, he (Mr. Papa) briefly mentioned the existence of slavery today - human trafficking - which targets children around our same age. This struck a chord with my close friend, Student #4, who decided they wanted to do something about it.”<sup>171</sup>

Student #8 reflects on the initial reaction to learning about human trafficking and experienced a reaction similar to student #4 and student #3, student #8 states:

My world was rocked because he had obviously learned about the evils of slavery and had developed a sense of what atrocities took place in both colonial and post-colonial America. When Mr. Papa showed our class the informative video by Love146 about human trafficking, it was no longer a question of what abhorrent system was happening 200 years ago but rather what was happening in my backyard. With that in mind, I was inspired to act and bring attention to the human trafficking and modern day slavery that was happening all around the world.<sup>172</sup>

The interviews reveal that the students linked their decision to act on the empathetic connections they made as result of learning about human trafficking. Empathy facilitated deeper learning as evidenced in the student’s interview responses as they incorporated words, such as “inspired,” “motivated,” and “amazed” when describing the decision to do more with the knowledge they gained.

Represented in the Project Stay Gold case study is a connection the students made between themselves and the children who are often victimized by the crime of human trafficking. According to reports, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

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<sup>170</sup> Student # 4, interview by the author.

<sup>171</sup> Student # 3, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 5, 2020.

<sup>172</sup> Student # 8, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 17, 2020.

describes the average age for a child sex trafficking victim is fifteen years old.<sup>173</sup> The overwhelming emotion of empathy within the Project Stay Gold middle school students is directly linked to the connection they made between themselves and the young victims who were their same age. Preventing the crime of human trafficking deeply resonated with the students as they learned that this crime directly impacted and affected young people similar to themselves. Student #8 submitted an essay written in high school about the role empathy played in motivating the students to do something with the knowledge gained:

The words of my teacher made me aware of the millions of people who are held against their will to perform various tasks that strip them of their humanity. I could not stop thinking of these victims, how they might be my age, love music, enjoy reading, have a mother, father, and brother. They could easily be me. The difference that sets us so drastically apart is that they are being exploited and held in captivity, while I am in a classroom learning about them.<sup>174</sup>

The case study describes the New Jersey Attorney General's First Annual Human Trafficking Awareness Day in Trenton, New Jersey when the Project Stay Gold students presented their project. In addition to the student presentations, Holly Austin Smith, a survivor of child trafficking described her experience as a fourteen-year-old young woman. Student #16 reflects on the speech she delivered that day:

Children our own age were trafficked in our very state, and we were unique in the fact that we were a student abolitionist movement. We recognized risk factors and worked towards combating the crime through prevention. Our story was supported after we heard the informative tale of Holly Smith, a human trafficking survivor who had been exploited by a 40-year-old man between her 8th and 9th grade year. Her tale was the manifestation of exactly what we endeavored to avoid, by educating youth as to where and how human trafficking rears its ugly head.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, "The Issues," National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

<sup>174</sup> Student # 8, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>175</sup> Student # 16, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 31, 2020.

Listening to Mrs. Smith's speech that afternoon was a transformative experience for the more than twenty students who attended the event. The students of PSG were in 8th and 9th grade as they listened to a survivor describe her story of child trafficking which occurred during the summer between her 8th and 9th grade year. This experience further confirmed their intrinsic motivation and empathic connection with the victims of child trafficking as they determined to speak for those in their generation who could not speak for themselves. Paulo Freire wrote, "Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed."<sup>176</sup> Empathy, certainly fueled their commitment to the cause of human trafficking prevention.

## **AGENCY**

Passion inspired and empathy motivated the students of Project Stay Gold to engage in deeper learning of human trafficking. While researching the issue, they decided to act on what they learned; they were determined to propose solutions and strategies to prevent the human rights violation directly impacting their generation. Jillianne Code defines agency as, "the capability of individuals to make choices and to act on those choices in ways that make a difference in their lives."<sup>177</sup> Psychologist Albert Bandura

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<sup>176</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 81.

<sup>177</sup> Jillianne Code, "Agency for Learning: Intention, Motivation, Self-Efficacy and Self-Regulation," *Frontiers in Education* 26 (February 2020): accessed November 25, 2020, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/educ.2020.00019/full>.

states, agency is “the power to originate action.”<sup>178</sup> In their interviews, students described the motivation they experienced to take action as they learned more about this issue.

Student # 9 stated, “I felt the need to do something to help those who have been trafficked or forced into modern-day slavery.”<sup>179</sup> Student #12 commented, “In that moment of disbelief and fear, I felt an obligation to do my part and spread awareness.”<sup>180</sup>

Student #7 added, “that I could do more is what got me really invested in believing that what I did was more than just ‘participate’ but could make a difference for a cause.”<sup>181</sup>

Here, the students describe the intrinsic motivation they experienced as they either first learned about human trafficking or as they grew in knowledge over time. A clear choice to respond to their learning with action is evident in their statements; a sense of ownership and empowerment to not accept the status quo and to make a difference.

Another perspective on student agency is the acknowledgement of the role a student’s voice plays in assuming ownership and control over their learning. From the beginning, one of the primary objectives of Project Stay Gold was the amplification of student voice. The first awareness campaign consisted of twenty-five eighth grade students teaching a lesson on modern-day slavery to the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade social studies classes inside of our middle school. Student #5 was a seventh grade student when they learned about human trafficking directly from their eighth grade peers; the interview revealed:

The first presentation I ever received on human trafficking was conducted by other middle and high school students. Seeing people my age speak so

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<sup>178</sup> Albert Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (February 2001): 3, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1>.

<sup>179</sup> Student # 9, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 21, 2020.

<sup>180</sup> Student # 12, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>181</sup> Student # 7, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 11, 2020.

passionately and knowledgeably about a topic beyond the purview of our JTMS experiences was so inspiring. It was the first time I realized that as a young person, I was, in fact, capable of making a real difference. My dream was always to do something that made an impact on the world around me. This felt like a daunting goal at 13 years old, but Project Stay Gold made the goal not only possible, but within reach.<sup>182</sup>

When student #5 entered eighth grade, they joined Project Stay Gold and quickly became a leader of the group, delivering speeches, directing and appearing in a public service announcement video, and mentoring other students. It was the voice of their peers who first communicated the issue that centered their attention on the human rights violation and ultimately provided them with an opportunity to make a difference as a middle school student. Similar to student #5, student #2 recounts the experience learning about human trafficking from a presentation in the classroom, “I have always been attracted to humanitarian causes and after a presentation, during my senior year in high school, I decided to join as I had the ability to during that time. I wanted to do something, no matter how small or trivial, while I still had the opportunity to do so.”<sup>183</sup> Whether learning about human trafficking from their teacher or their peers, the students who decided to join Project Stay Gold were intrinsically inspired to act on the knowledge they had gained. Student #1 stated:

I've always believed in doing your part to make a difference. This has always been a passion of mine, whether it was picking up trash on the side of the road, standing up for someone in need, joining an incredible movement like Project Stay Gold, and eventually joining the United States Marine Corps. We all need to do our part to make our world a better place for the generations who come after us.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Student # 5, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 7, 2020.

<sup>183</sup> Student # 2, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, July 29, 2020.

<sup>184</sup> Student # 1, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, July 29, 2020.

The goal of education is to empower young people to do something great with their lives by making a difference wherever they find themselves, as student #1 clearly demonstrates.

Action Inspired Learning begins with the values of passion, empathy, and student agency. Values are about action; we live out the values we believe by acting upon them. In the Project Stay Gold case study, the teacher possessed a passion for bringing awareness to issue of human trafficking which ignited a passion within a group of students. In turn, the students started an awareness club to educate their middle school community about the crime of human trafficking; their passion for awareness and prevention was contagious, which inspired others to join the cause. As passion inspired deeper learning, students quickly felt the call to action from within when they realized that this injustice directly impacted their generation. Throughout the early stages of their learning, they put themselves inside the shoes of the victims and survivors of human trafficking and the overwhelming sense of empathy inspired profound learning. Finally, as passion ignited the flame and empathy increased the fire within to make a difference, the students decided to assume ownership over their learning and take action with the knowledge they gained to do their part in raising awareness and preventing the crime of human trafficking within their community. The students were empowered by the knowledge acquired and the confidence instilled in them by their teachers to use their voices to raise awareness throughout their middle school. Amplifying their voices inspired many of their peers to want to learn more, which motivated them to take action with the new knowledge they gained; in turn when they entered eighth grade, they, too, joined Project Stay Gold. This cycle of contagious activism was ignited by a small group

of passionate students but then spread like wildfire across their campus and beyond.

Overall, Action Inspired Learning begins with passion, empathy, and student agency which in turn engages students in authentic experiences that inspire and motivate them to do something meaningful by taking action and making history.

## **LEARNING THAT EMPOWERS**

In my interview with Dr. Cathryn Devereaux, a professor at Drew University, she made the point that students already have the power to bring about change inside of them. What students need are educators who will move out of the way and teach them to access the power already inside.<sup>185</sup> Igniting the power already within young people to extend ownership over their learning with the skills and abilities to transform the world in which they live is the first dynamic step of the Action Inspired Learning process. Learning that empowers creates a unique opportunity for students to do something impactful with the knowledge and understanding they gain. In the Project Stay Gold case study, the middle school students made a significant connection to the young victims of child trafficking and determined to make a difference within their community and beyond. Action Inspired Learning is an experience that inspires students to discover the power inside them and tap into that energy to create something monumental that manifests meaningful change in society whether on a large or small scale; this type of learning experience will endure throughout a lifetime.

Examining the relevance of the learning experienced by the students in Project Stay Gold, the impact of their empowerment is evident in their reflections and experiences. In the student interviews when they were asked to describe their experience

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<sup>185</sup> Cathryn Devereaux, Ed.D., video conference interview by the author, Lake Hopatcong, NJ, November 29, 2021.



in Project Stay Gold as a student by reflecting on the defining moments; they described examples of how Action Inspired Learning empowered them to make a difference.

Student #3 described their experience:

Being a member of PSG in middle and high school was special, we were a group of students doing something that mattered beyond our four walls. All of our experiences and events were memorable, but two stick out the most. First, being apart of a series of PSG videos to be played in schools and outside organizations was amazing. Second, being invited by interim Senator Jeffrey Chiesa to witness his first speech on the Senate floor, where he mentioned PSG, was where our organization realized the impact we were making on society. Thinking back to where we started - a group of kids developing educational materials to share to our own student body - to that same organization being mentioned by a NJ Senator, is almost surreal.<sup>186</sup>

In the interview, student #5 described the empowering learning experiences they discovered as a student in Project Stay Gold:

Every opportunity I got to speak in educational and legislative spaces were defining moments for me. Not only did my time as a key speaker in Project Stay Gold define & solidify my love of public speaking and communication, but it also empowered me. As a young person, as a woman, and as a black person, I often felt unheard and unseen. I never felt that my voice was of any real importance. But having state officials, activists, educators, and peers not only hear me but respond so positively to what I had to say was truly so empowering. Again, the moment when you realize you are capable of making a REAL difference is such a formative & powerful one. I will never forget the humility, gratitude, pride, and impact I felt whenever Mr. Papa would ask me to speak or share with the group all the praise we received from his colleagues after presenting at a certain event. Suddenly, I went from being just some little black girl with good grades, to a young woman with a voice, a mission, and a bright future.<sup>187</sup>

Student #6 expressed how they were empowered to speak with their peers about the importance of knowing the risk factors and warning signs of human trafficking:

I would say that the most defining part of it all, was the opportunity to speak to so many students about the dangers of human trafficking. Essentially, we shared

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<sup>186</sup> Student #3, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>187</sup> Student # 5, Google forms interview by the author.

what could potentially be lifesaving information to students not only in our own district, but all over the state of New Jersey. The opportunity to discuss warning signs and commonalities among instances of human trafficking with kids our own age, and shed light on a topic that at the time was not really talked about was major.<sup>188</sup>

Student #10 recalls the experience of teaching students at a local high school about human trafficking; they stated, “It was a similar story where students were paying close attention and asking questions and it was fulfilling again passing along the information to other who could then continue to pass it along. It was very empowering for me.”<sup>189</sup>

The Project Stay Gold learning experience was first sparked by the teacher’s passion for the issue of human trafficking. Passion opened the door which led to a deeper desire to learn and as students researched the issue, they developed a real sense of empathy for the victims of the crime. They were motivated to own their learning and tangibly participated in discovering solutions and proposing awareness and preventative strategies. As the students led the awareness campaign they began to experience what it feels like to be empowered by knowledge to use their skills and abilities to make a difference. Empowered to lead, the students became activists as they drafted and delivered dozens of speeches, produced eight public service announcements, formed partnerships with law enforcement, government leaders, and not for profit organizations, created works of art, designed educational resources/materials, and launched a website. Ultimately, student empowerment is the bridge between learning and action.

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<sup>188</sup> Student #6, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 11, 2020.

<sup>189</sup> Student #10, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 23, 2020.

## LEARNING THAT IS PURPOSEFUL

There is one question every student should consider answering: what can I do with the knowledge and skills I have gained? Inspired by passion, empathy, and agency, the students of PSG were empowered by their teachers, their education, and an intrinsic motivation to take action by raising awareness and proposing solutions to combat human trafficking. As the students were determined to make a difference, they discovered meaningful ways to impact the prevention of child trafficking among their generation; this became their purpose. Therefore, the second dynamic of Action Inspired Learning leads students through a meaningful learning process in which students experience making an impact and becoming an effective voice for change.

Educational theorist John Dewey is known as the father of the progressive education movement. In 2017, Erin Hopkins stated, “progressive education’s main goal was practical relevance. Two main components of progressive education are learning by doing so that understanding and meaning can take place and advancing social responsibility and democracy.”<sup>190</sup> Dewey believed that students learned best through experience, “a philosophy of education based upon a philosophy of experience.”<sup>191</sup> Purpose, which is a manifestation of learning, is the physical act of direct engagement with the subject, content, project, or problem to produce a meaningful outcome. Dewey wrote, “the organic connection between education and personal experience; or the new philosophy of education is committed to some kind of empirical and experimental philosophy.”<sup>192</sup> As the students began to act upon their learning, they began to experience

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<sup>190</sup> Erin A. Hopkins, "John Dewey and Progressive Education," *The Journal of Educational Thought* 50, no. 1 (Winter 2017): [Page #], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372390?seq=1>.

<sup>191</sup> John Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 29.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

meaningful results to their actions. For example, student #7 articulates the meaning and purpose they discovered through the action they took:

It made me realize that all the hard work I did for school, could be put into something meaningful. Some of the most memorable moments were the countless presentations all over the state or meeting with the state Attorney General about our work as high school students. PSG was the first time I realized how much a voice could really matter and make a difference.<sup>193</sup>

Student #7's words demonstrate the organic connection between education and personal experience to which Dewey refers. They not only found meaning in their education, they discovered the effective impact her voice could have in making a difference and that discovery will leave a lasting impact throughout the course of their life.

What began as a passion to raise awareness inside their middle school quickly became the students' distinct purpose to bring the message of awareness to anyone who would listen. As they were empowered by their educational experience, the students desired to empower others with passion, empathy, and agency. Their passion and desire inspired a plan of action, a bold vision to make a lasting impact by influencing others to start the conversation, to learn more, and to respond by acting in a way to make a difference. Action Inspired Learning produces learning that is full purpose as communicated by the PSG students in their interviews. Student #8 stated, "I remember working with Senator Jeff Chiesa, who used his time in the US Senate to draw attention to human trafficking. All of the trips that we took to various community centers, government organizations, legislative bodies, task forces, were a culmination of our passion as young students to raise awareness and bring justice to those who fell victim to

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<sup>193</sup> Student #7, Google forms interview by the author.

this horrendous crime.”<sup>194</sup> Student #9 stated, “As a student in Project Stay Gold, I always felt that I was able to contribute a part of myself so that others could be helped. Project Stay Gold helped me discover how I could use some of my talents to serve others.”<sup>195</sup>

Student #11 expressed:

Through these years of advocacy, we truly awakened many hearts and minds to the horrors of this practice, and we believe that exposing the issue was the best weapon we could wield to kill it. I really do believe that there are thousands of people who first heard of this issue--and perhaps only ever heard of it--because of our organization. And I would like to believe that this further widespread knowledge has contributed in our worldwide fight against human trafficking.<sup>196</sup>

Student #14 stated, “We had numerous meetings where we planned out campaigns across the school, town, and also presentations throughout the community. We had a tight knit group who were all passionate about the issues, working hard on the club's goals as well as benefiting from being around others with the passion for history and intentions to make the world a better place.”<sup>197</sup>

Student #15 expressed,

There are so many defining moments that I can think of, but the one that stands out the most is when Mr. Papa testified on the senate floor. The fact that something that started off as a small group of students and teachers wanting to spread awareness about human trafficking led to Mr. Papa actually being able to speak with senators about potential solutions. It showed me how when you truly care about something and take action, anyone can bring about some form of change.<sup>198</sup>

According to John Dewey, purpose has an end-view which prompts action by the learner. It is evident in the reflections of the Project Stay Gold students that they

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<sup>194</sup> Student #8, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>195</sup> Student #9, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>196</sup> Student #11, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 26, 2020.

<sup>197</sup> Student #14, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 30, 2020.

<sup>198</sup> Student #15, Google forms interview by the author, Internet, August 30, 2020.

discovered a deep sense of purpose as they executed their mission and vision. The students measured their purpose by the influence they had on their peers, government officials, and the general public. The New Jersey Commission on Human Trafficking 2014 Annual Report recognized the inspiring efforts of PSG, the report states, “Information about human trafficking has begun to reach a large number of middle and high schools in New Jersey, groups, including the Attorney General’s Office and Project Stay Gold, have engaged schools with information about human trafficking, the problem in New Jersey, warning signs, and how students can join in the fight to combat trafficking.”<sup>199</sup> Additionally, the New Jersey Star Ledger interviewed the PSG students for a feature story titled “NJ students speak out against Super Bowl sex trade” to showcase their “Not On Our Turf” Super Bowl awareness campaign and placed the story on the front page of their website on Sunday, January 26, 2014. As mentioned by the students, PSG was mentioned by US Senator Jeff Chiesa in the United States Senate on July 23, 2013 which is recorded in the Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 113th Congress, First Session.

A large portion of the vision and mission of the students Project Stay Gold included educational initiatives at the state level to facilitate awareness and prevention education in schools throughout New Jersey. In February of 2018, a bill was introduced in the Women and Child Committee of the New Jersey State Assembly. The author of the bill inquired of the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking for input on the original draft, so we offered a number of amendments to the original language of the bill

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<sup>199</sup> Attorney General's Office, New Jersey Commission on Human Trafficking 2014 Annual Report, A. , at 23 (N.J. 2014). Accessed December 7, 2020. pg 6  
[https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/OPI/Reports\\_to\\_the\\_Legislature/human\\_trafficking\\_commission\\_2014.pdf](https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/OPI/Reports_to_the_Legislature/human_trafficking_commission_2014.pdf).

to center the legislation on students. Student #16, a former member of PSG, then a student at The College of New Jersey offered testimony in favor of the bill's passage out of committee. After some time, the bipartisan bill A1428 unanimously passed through the Assembly and Senate and was signed into law on July 19, 2019 by New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy. The law states:

The Department of Education, in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General and the Department of Children and Families, shall develop and distribute to school districts guidelines concerning child trafficking. The purpose of the guidelines shall be to provide direction for schools in creating awareness of child trafficking, including warning signs and risk factors associated with child trafficking and how to prevent child trafficking.<sup>200</sup>

Additionally, the New Jersey Department of Education has identified Project Stay Gold as an exemplar program and has included it as one of their resources on their Keeping Our Kids Safe, Healthy & in School: Human Trafficking Resources website. The passage of A1428 the *Guidelines on Child Trafficking* legislation is the fulfillment of the Project Stay Gold vision. From the beginning, the students desired to see the day when young people across New Jersey would receive an education about human trafficking; that day has come and their influence is evident. The success of this legislation is the pinnacle of their mission, a fulfillment of their dreams, and a manifestation of their purpose-filled end-view.

## **LEARNING THAT ENDURES**

As educators, how can we guarantee that the knowledge and skills our students obtain under our leadership and guidance through the learning process will endure over

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<sup>200</sup> Development, distribution of guidelines concerning child trafficking., No. 1428, 2019 N.J. Laws (July 19, 2019). Accessed December 7, 2020.  
[https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2018/Bills/AL19/189\\_.PDF](https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2018/Bills/AL19/189_.PDF).

the course of a lifetime? If the lessons we teach are not carried through a student's life, should we reconsider what or how we are teaching? Learning that endures begins and ends with an empowering and inspiring experience that ignites passion and awakens a deep sense of purpose within the intellectual development of young people. When students make decisions based on past experiences, they are continuing to be molded and shaped by what they have been taught. Dewey wrote, "Every experience is a moving force. Experience does not go on simply inside a person. It does go on there, for it influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose."<sup>201</sup> Therefore, the final phase of Action Inspired Learning consists of learning that endures over the course of a lifetime as the inspiration students experience influences college and career decisions and directly impacts civic participation.

As an essential component to Action Inspired Learning, enduring learning is directly linked to high levels of engagement throughout students' experiences in Project Stay Gold. When students engage in authentic learning experiences, they will archive the knowledge and skills acquired from the action they implemented and access it over the course of their life. Brain researcher, David A. Sousa found, "successful teachers use a variety of methods, keeping in mind that students are more likely to retain and achieve whenever they are actively engaged in the learning."<sup>202</sup> The students of PSG engaged in activism as they wrote and delivered speeches, produced public service announcements, advocated for education as a means of prevention with government officials and law enforcement, educated their peers, invested time into research of the issue, and designed

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<sup>201</sup> Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 38 & 39.

<sup>202</sup> David A. Sousa, *How the Brain Learns*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin, 2016), 95.



an awareness campaign to reach the general public with the message of awareness and prevention. According to the Paulo Freire Freedom School website, Paulo Freire knew that for real learning to take place the learner must own the process and be an active agent and meaning-maker in the process.<sup>203</sup> Brain researchers have now proven that real learning (deep, enduring understanding of content) only happens when learners are engaged in this way.<sup>204</sup>

A child's intellectual, emotional, and social development in school prepares them for the rest of their lives and has a direct link to their success. Author and historian, Bruce Lesh wrote, "teachers provide students with a deeper, more rigorous learning experience and establish within those students a set of lifelong skills easily transferable to the world of work."<sup>205</sup> Action Inspired Learning produces a learning experience that endures beyond secondary education, leaving a lasting impact on a young person directly influencing the decisions they will make about college, career, and civic participation. Dewey wrote, "Thus I have attempted to indicate how the school may be connected with life so that the experience gained by the child in a familiar, commonplace way is carried over and made use of there, and what the child learns in the school is carried back and applied in everyday life, making the school an organic whole, instead of a composite of isolated parts."<sup>206</sup> Dewey identifies that the student's experience in school is carried and applied to everyday life, establishing the enduring legacy of one's educational background and experience. Essentially, school provides the foundational empiricism for students as they

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<sup>203</sup> Paulo Freire Freedom Schools, "About PFFS," Paulo Freire Freedom Schools, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.paulofreireschool.org/about/>.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Bruce Lesh, *"Why Won't You Just Tell Us the Answer?"* (Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2011), 5.

<sup>206</sup> John Dewey, *The School*, 54.

become participants in society and the world community. As an example, the impact of serving a cause greater than oneself makes an impression that will then influence individual decisions and personal convictions as an adult contributes to society. The Project Stay Gold student interviews reveal dynamic examples of how Action Inspired Learning produced learning experiences that began during their school experience and have endured over the course of their lives.

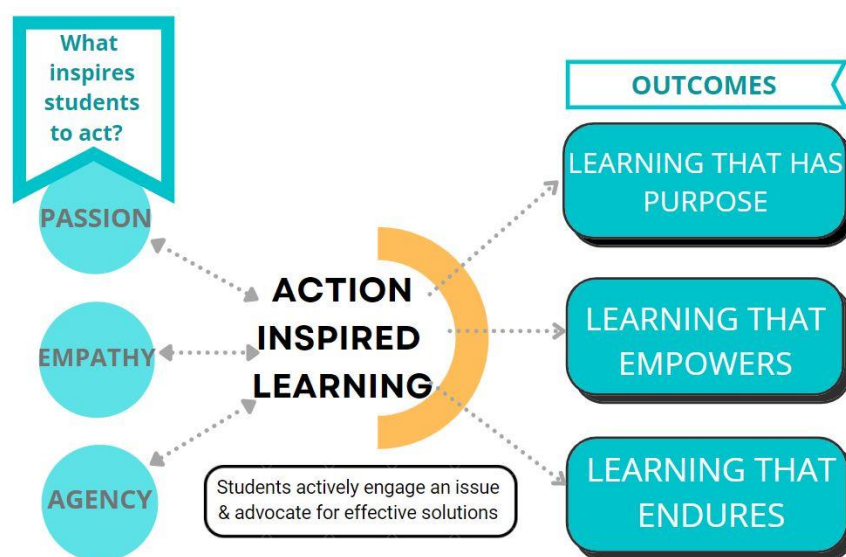


Figure 3 | Action Inspired Learning

### How did PSG impact your college experience?

Student #4 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their college experience:

My involvement in Project Stay Gold led me into becoming a political science major, which I viewed as a way to continue my interests as I entered college. I discussed the importance of learning about history as something of the past, present, and future, and how this can encourage students to be critical of silences within history and to be political actors of the present.<sup>207</sup>

Student #5 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their college experience:

<sup>207</sup> Student #4, Google forms interview by the author.

However, thanks to the skills I gained in Project Stay Gold, I was able to use my voice and become a contributing member of every community I was in. I also applied a spirit of advocacy to all the work I did. From my direction of the Vagina Monologues & Yoni Ki Baat to tell women's stories or the use of my senior thesis project to hold BU accountable for its BIPOC mental health resources, advocacy was at the heart of all my work at BU. Even my choice to become a journalism major was inspired by the power of knowledge that PSG taught me first hand.<sup>208</sup>

Student #7 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their college experience:

My experiences with PSG, SCNO, and other activities helped me achieve a Rising Junior Scholarship for the Park Scholar program, a full-scholarship program awarded to a few students in the Park Communications school for their dedication in academics, service, leadership, and involvement. The purpose of the program is for students to take their majors in communications/media and use the power they hold to create positive impacts. Every semester the program required multiple group/individual service projects and social justice learning. Along with that senior year we are on a trip to Tucson AZ to learn about and serve at the border. I completely accredit my scholarship to Project Stay Gold. My passion for service and understanding the impact I can have, especially while using media, all started with PSG. My understanding of service and using my skills and knowledge to do so is what I believe helped me in the vigorous application and interview process for the Park Scholar Program.<sup>209</sup>

Student #9 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their college experience:

Project Stay Gold drove me to continue using my talents to serve others and the community in college. Without Project Stay Gold, I do not know if I would have had the same drive to serve others and the community in college. I believe that it was, and still is, the springboard for my desire to serve others in everything that I do.<sup>210</sup>

Student #12 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their college experience:

Project Stay Gold taught me to be a confident leader and to always stand up for what I believe in. These skills helped me earn leadership roles in my sorority as well as my theater company at Rutgers.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Student #5, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>209</sup> Student #7, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>210</sup> Student #9, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>211</sup> Student #12, Google forms interview by the author.

The student responses reveal how the Action Inspired Learning experience they were exposed to in middle and high school prepared them for leadership opportunities as they attended college. Their learning experiences shaped many of their decisions on majors and courses of study. Furthermore, Action Inspired Learning empowered students through the amplification of their voices to communicate and articulate bold and relevant solutions to a global issue. Not only did many of the students discover their voices, they established a confidence in their ability to communicate what they learned in clear and effective ways. Then, the students were able to adapt and transfer these skills in the areas of leadership, academics, and service throughout their college and university campuses.

Furthermore, the student responses demonstrate how Action Inspired Learning directly ignited a passion for service throughout their college experiences. The common thread woven through the student responses is their desire to either serve others or serve a cause greater than themselves, which exhibits the enduring nature of their learning experience. The personal statements outlining the four years immediately following high school reveal that these students were directly influenced by the impressions made by their time serving their community through Project Stay Gold. Action Inspired Learning creates a lasting impact and produces learning outcomes that endure beyond middle and high school and are carried on to the next stage of life through the various college experiences, inspiring leadership, service, and high levels of achievement.

### **How did Project Stay Gold have an influence on your career choices?**

Student #3 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their career choices:

As a member of PSG, we were often given the opportunity to speak to our local community or in places of influence (e.g., NJCAHT meetings). As students, it can be pretty intimidating to speak in front of federal officers, politicians and other community leaders. Luckily, this experience allowed me to become more and

more comfortable talking in front of crowds and one-on-one with influential people, and simultaneously elevated my interest in communication in general. This led to my degree in communication and career in public relations.<sup>212</sup>

Student #5 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their career choices:

While I'm currently balancing a few different career options (journalism, nonprofit communications, or Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work), all of them stem from my desire to advocate for people who are suffering. My desire to tell the stories or work on behalf of people whose lives are affected by injustice.<sup>213</sup>

Student #9 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their career choices:

Project Stay Gold helped give me direction in my journey to becoming a doctor. I also plan on learning about how to professionally care for those who were victims of human trafficking and modern-day slavery and to better understand how I can help them medically. One day, I hope that it could become a defining part of my private practice.<sup>214</sup>

Student #11 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their career choices:

I have always wanted to be a doctor since I was a little kid, and that has not changed; I am currently in medical school. My experience with PSG reaffirmed by dedication to help others in a palpable, meaningful way--not just for monetary gain but for the spiritual fulfillment gained from helping my fellow man. PSG especially opened my eyes to the plight of children, and I hope to work in the field of pediatrics to help protect the lives of at-risk children.<sup>215</sup>

Student #13 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their career choices:

I am in the social work profession currently. I think the idea of helping people from an advocacy standpoint in PSG and other experiences helped me figure out that I like to help people one-on-one.<sup>216</sup>

Student #15 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their career choices:

When I graduated college, my first job was in marketing / event planning. After working there for almost a year, I have actually decided to go to Graduate school for educational counseling. My goal is to be a school counselor in a high school and I am excited to use my education from PSG to hopefully encourage changes in the classroom regarding human trafficking education. Even if it is just having

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<sup>212</sup> Student #3, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>213</sup> Student #5, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>214</sup> Student # 9, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>215</sup> Student #11, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>216</sup> Student #13, Google forms interview by the author.

open conversations with my students about human trafficking, this awareness can go a long way.<sup>217</sup>

The advocacy and activism experienced by the Project Stay Gold students had a direct impact on defining the career paths they decided to carve out and began to follow. The answers provided by the students reveal their passion for serving others can be traced back to the Action Inspired Learning experience of advocating for the victims of human trafficking. The careers selected by the students manifest the outcome of a life dedicated to making a difference whether as a journalist, a school counselor, or a medical doctor. The authentic learning experience of serving a cause greater than themselves directly influenced the career path they chose as they determined to make a living invoking change through service to others. The students clearly discovered a passion for service and, in turn, translated that emotion into careers that will last a lifetime.

The enduring nature of the Action Inspired Learning experience is evidenced in the knowledge and skills acquired over time by the Project Stay Gold students. For example, in their statements they acknowledge the distinct role public speaking had on the development of their ability to communicate effectively, which is a critical distinction of every occupation. The ability to articulate the complexities of an issue such as human trafficking as young middle school students created unique opportunities to grow in the knowledge of the issue and develop the skills of communication through spoken words, video productions, art, music, and technology. Learning the art of effective communication through various forms of media is an enduring foundational lesson in which a successful career is built.

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<sup>217</sup> Student #15, Google forms interview by the author.

**In what ways has your experience in Project Stay Gold influenced your civic participation as an adult?**

Student #16 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their civic participation:

PSG has made me a more "conscious consumer". We vote with our wallets to "reward" the decisions that firms make. As such, as a consumer, I continue to be cognizant about companies that use child or forced labor, or have elements of their supply chains that are dependent on child or forced labor. If I did not have the background I did I think I would be unaware of the implications of complex and international industrial processes and supply chains. I know there is still room for me to do more. Politically, I am inclined to support policies and candidates that promote fair treatment and protection of trafficking victims.<sup>218</sup>

Student #3 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their civic participation:

Being a member of PSG has made me hyper aware of social justices occurring around the world. Because of this, I am an advocate for human rights for all and fight for those in need. Whether it is attending a local teach-in/protest or encouraging others to get out and vote, I do my best to educate those around me on the realities of the world and the need for change.<sup>219</sup>

Student #5 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their civic participation:

Project Stay Gold was the beginning of my passion for civic engagement. Through the presentations and demonstrations, I did as a PSG member, I cultivated my voice as an activist. Now, my life does not feel fulfilled if I am not using my voice to create change and advocate for others.<sup>220</sup>

Student #7 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their civic participation:

PSG is what began my involvement in service. As previously mentioned I have done a lot with service throughout college. Everything I have done and learned has taught me deep empathy and completely opened my eyes to the injustices in the world around me. I am at a turning point in my life where I am not too sure what the next thing is going to be that I will get involved in, but I know that due to all these experiences that I will never be satisfied with doing nothing. Whether it is a career I find or something I volunteer my personal time to, I plan to always

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<sup>218</sup> Student #16, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>219</sup> Student #3, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>220</sup> Student #5, Google forms interview by the author.

be involved in service and working towards something I care about in some way.<sup>221</sup>

Student #8 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their civic participation:

PSG has definitely influenced my civil participation as an adult! The whole organization focused around taking action and effecting change in the world around you. I have carried those lessons into my college and post-graduate life. I will forever think about my role in the world differently because of my work with PSG, whether it be through volunteering or participation in elections/awareness campaigns. There is no doubt that PSG played an influential role in me approaching the world wanting to help those around me.<sup>222</sup>

Student #13 described the impact of Action Inspired Learning on their career choices:

It has made me more vocal about issues of injustice in our society like racism, police brutality, and xenophobia.<sup>223</sup>

As a social studies educator, I share a similar vision for educating students as does the National Council for the Social Studies which states, “A world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action.”<sup>224</sup> Empowering students to think critically about the world around them is an enduring skill which is essential to a lifetime of civic participation and active citizenship. In the Project Stay Gold interviews, the students identify the role of PSG in shaping their understanding of social justice causes by fostering an empathetic awareness to raise their voices to speak on behalf of the voiceless. Learning about the existence of injustice in our society had a distinct impact on the students' decision making as adults and how they envision their

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<sup>221</sup> Student #7, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>222</sup> Student #8, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>223</sup> Student #13, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>224</sup> National Council for the Social Studies, "About, Mission," National Council for the Social Studies.



role as contributing citizens as conscientious consumers, supporters of activist causes, volunteers, and as voters. The Action Inspired Learning experience influenced a spirit of enduring service and activism as the students stated their determination to confront all forms of injustice through a lifetime of civic participation.

The primary objective for every educator is to prepare children and adolescents for the future that awaits them within our society. One goal for educators of all disciplines and backgrounds is to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate the complexities of the world around them. Furthermore, social studies educators have determined that civic participation is a critically essential component of a democratic nation to inspire young people to expand their worldview to understand the role they can and will play in a democratic government. Thus, future citizenry is central to the survival of any democracy, which strives for active participation and effectual engagement. In *The School and Society*, John Dewey wrote:

An embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history and science. When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious.<sup>225</sup>

Dewey acknowledges that the positive outcomes of a learning experience that saturates a young person with the “spirit of service” and “instruments of effective self-direction” is a “society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious.” The PSG students first experienced the spirit of service in middle and high school, eventually carrying that learning experience with them into college and their careers, ultimately defining their view of

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<sup>225</sup> Dewey, *The School*, 19 & 20.

civic participation. Additionally, student empowerment and agency are the practical instruments of effective self-direction experienced by the students as they engage in Action Inspired Learning.

### **SERVICE LEARNING vs. ACTION INSPIRED LEARNING**

It is important to recognize the commonalities between Service Learning and Action Inspired Learning. Both student-centered projects begin with inquiry and ask students to engage the research process to solve a problem.<sup>226</sup> Service-learning is defined by Youth.gov as, “teaching and learning strategy that connects academic curriculum to community problem-solving.”<sup>227</sup> As identified in the Project Stay Gold case study, students connected the issue of modern-slavery with the curriculum content from their social studies classes. Furthermore, Action Inspired Learning and Service Learning both effectively connect students with their communities, promote social, emotional, and character skills, as well as increasing a sense of civic participation among young people.<sup>228</sup> Students learn from serving a cause and meeting an area of need within their community, which ultimately creates authentic learning opportunities for each participant. Similar to Action Inspired Learning, students who engage in Service Learning experience their learning as they actively participate in hands-on projects enhancing their knowledge.

One way that Action Inspired Learning differentiates itself from service learning is identified in the length of the project. In her article “What The Heck Is Service

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<sup>226</sup> Kaye, *The Complete*, 14.

<sup>227</sup> United States Government, "Service Learning," Youth.gov, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/civic-engagement-and-volunteering/service-learning>.

<sup>228</sup> United States Government, "Service Learning," Youth.gov.

Learning?” Heather Wolpert-Gawron outlines the type of service learning projects; she wrote:

Here are several ideas for service-learning units: Work on a Habitat for Humanity building site, Pack up food bags for the homeless, Adopt-a-Highway, Set up a tutoring system or reading buddies with younger students, Clean up a local park or beach, Launch a drought and water awareness campaign, or Create a “pen pal” video conferencing group with a senior citizens home.<sup>229</sup>

In these examples, the service projects are a one-time project with clearly stated objectives and once it is achieved, the students accomplish their goal. Service learning projects have an end goal in mind and the project is completed once the goal is met. For example, Montpelier High School in Vermont, has annually engaged students for ten years in a service project inside of their greenhouse. The timeframe of the project consists of three to four weeks and connects to a unit in the curriculum.<sup>230</sup> In Eminence, Kentucky, students and teachers collaborate twice a school year for three days on meaningful projects that serve their community.<sup>231</sup> According to the Youth Service America organization, they promote a semester of service to usually last 10-12 weeks or could be 8-14+ weeks.<sup>232</sup> Additionally, a Classroom With a Cause usually lasts 4-6 weeks or could be 2-8 weeks.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>229</sup>Heather Wolpert Gawron, "What the Heck Is Service Learning?," *Edutopia* (blog), entry posted November 7, 2016, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/what-heck-service-learning-heather-wolpert-gawron>.

<sup>230</sup>Edutopia, "Having Students Serve Their District," *Edutopia* (blog), entry posted February 3, 2015, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.edutopia.org/practice/service-learning-real-life-applications-learning>.

<sup>231</sup>Edutopia, "Having Students Serve Their District," *Edutopia* (blog), entry posted February 3, 2015, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.edutopia.org/practice/service-learning-real-life-applications-learning>.

<sup>232</sup>Youth Service America, "Semester of Service, Summer of Service," Youth Service America, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://ysa.org/campaigns/semester/>.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

Overall, Service Learning projects tend to be momentary; annual projects with a prescribed timeframe for the project to be completed and do not necessarily have a long term commitment to an issue or cause. Service Learning projects are often connected to one unit or one course of study within a limited space of time. Whereas, Action Inspired Learning is a sustained work that transcends multiple years and courses of study. In the case of Project Stay Gold, the students remained committed and engaged in the anti-trafficking movement for an average of five years. The majority of the students interviewed joined PSG in eighth grade and remained committed through their high school graduation. In several instances the students carried the work on with them into college. Action Inspired Learning is a sustained project with a commitment to an issue or a cause which exists over the course of multiple years.

Secondly, Action Inspired Learning differentiates itself from service-learning as students commit to generating lasting change by leading their efforts to make a large scale difference over time. As stated above, in service learning students learn through a service experience within their community. Whether they are cleaning up a local area, collecting items for a food bank, assisting at a build site, or volunteering for a political campaign, the students learn through service. In Action Inspired Learning, students learn by becoming activists for a cause. As activists, students determined to affect change within their community as they campaigned for the prevention of human trafficking through advocacy, fundraising, marketing, political engagement, and eventually establishing a nonprofit organization. As activists, students are determined to produce change within their society and beyond; they seek to make a lasting impact. Through

active participation students emerge as leaders within a community. With voice, influence, and determination, they make a direct and positive impact.

A final difference between Service Learning and Action Inspired Learning is found in the role of the participants. Oftentimes in service learning the teacher establishes the service project and connects it to a unit of the curriculum. The teacher leads the effort within the community by directing the project from a logistical and organizational context. The students play an active role in the project; however, they are not necessarily in a leadership role. In contrast, in instances of Action Inspired Learning, students assume a leadership role from the genesis of the project. As evidenced in the case of Project Stay Gold, the students decided to accelerate their work from an awareness campaign in their school to a viable organization influencing many facets of their community. The students embraced their leadership role as they executed the mission and vision of PSG by contacting local schools to schedule presentations, writing and delivering speeches at large events, creating a website and public service announcements, and collaborating with law enforcement and nonprofit organizations to advance their awareness message. All along the journey, the students led the decision-making process and guided the project. Essentially, the teacher played the role of facilitator as the students solved problems, made decisions, assessed their progress, and accomplished their mission.

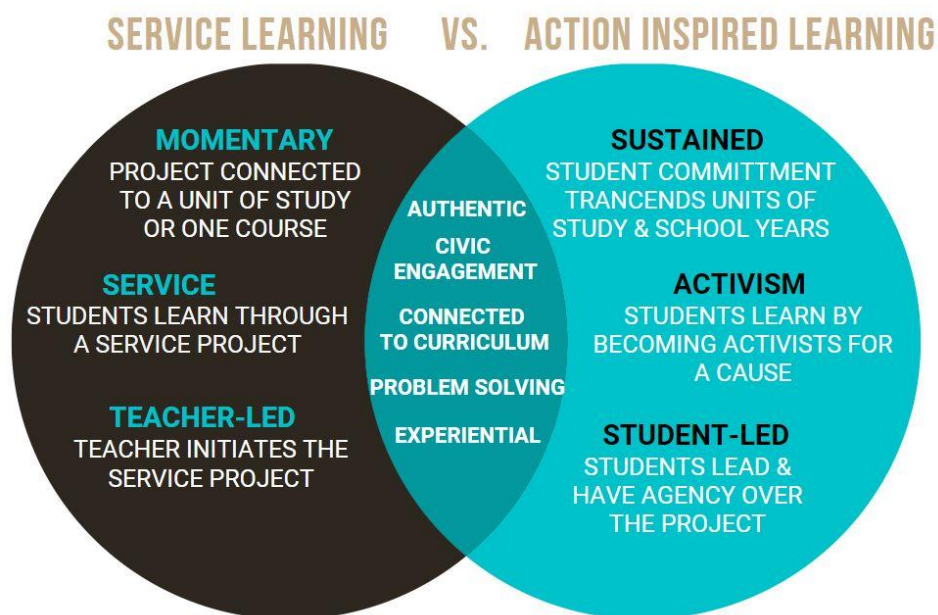


Figure 4 | Service Learning vs. Action Inspired Learning

The New Jersey based organization, Breaking the Chains Through Education (BTCTE) is a profound example of an Action Inspired Learning experience. In 2006, Evan Robbins, a high school social studies teacher introduced his students to the topic of children in Ghana, Africa used as modern slaves in the fishing industry. Mr. Robbins and his students established BTCTE as an after school club. Eventually, they partnered with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and raised \$24,000 to rescue five trafficked children in Ghana.<sup>234</sup> Their website states, “BTCTE is committed not only to rescuing as many children as possible, but to restoring them to a life of dignity and a quality education, we established a system of ongoing monitoring for each child rescued.”<sup>235</sup> To date, BTCTE financially supports more than 100 children; 50% of the children have been rescued by their efforts. They have built a school building, fund

<sup>234</sup>Breaking the Chain Through Education, "Our Story," Breaking the Chain Through Education, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.btcte.org/our-story-1>.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

teacher salaries and provide additional resources for the children of Ghana.<sup>236</sup> This organization that traces its roots to a group of high school students, inspired by their social studies teacher to take action by founding a nonprofit organization to rescue children from slavery, has raised more than a half million dollars and forever transformed young lives and communities in Ghana, Africa. BTCTE embodies the practical and theoretical philosophy of Action Inspired Learning. As exemplified in the mission and accomplishments of PSG and BTCTE, students are inspired by what they learned; they commit themselves to a cause of justice or a human rights issue and manifest substantive change by making an effective difference in their world. In their fifteenth year, BTCTE demonstrates a sustained commitment to the abolition of child slaves in Ghana. Now a thriving nonprofit organization, BTCTE began with a committed group of student activists assuming leadership roles on the issue of child slaves.

Students possess the undeniable capacity to change the world. When students experience passion, empathy, and agency as a result of their learning process, they are motivated to do something extraordinary. When learning inspires students to take action there are countless possibilities for young people to apply what they have learned and make a substantial difference. As students participate in Action Inspired Learning, they truly experience learning that empowers, learning that has purpose, and learning that endures over the course of a lifetime. The PSG student reflections and responses demonstrate the real and dynamic impact Action Inspired Learning has had on their lives beyond high school and that it still influences their worldview and the roles they play in their communities.

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS of ACTION INSPIRED LERNING**

#### **THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER**

What was the moment you realized that you had to do something (about human trafficking)? This question lies at the heart of Action Inspired Learning and was asked of me during my interview with Marc Skvirsky who served 37 years as Vice President and Chief Program Officer for Facing History and Ourselves. The context of our interview focused on responsibility and perspective when choosing to participate in direct involvement with bringing about social change. As we both shared the issues we are most passionate about, Mr. Skvirsky challenged me with the opening question about the moment I became aware that I had to do something to prevent the sexual exploitation of children. Even though the moment I realized that I needed to do something about human trafficking occurred prior to my teaching career, the passion that I possessed for the human rights issue permeated inside of my classroom. As a teacher, I created a learning environment where students could experience inspirational moments that influenced them to realize that they too had to do something with their new found understanding.

The first role of the teacher in Action Inspired Learning is to cultivate a classroom environment where students are safe to experience unique moments as learning awakens a palpable reality to the information they are presented with. Revisiting the learning moment for student #4 in Chapter 4; the student was presented with information that made an impact and within the classroom environment she experienced a moment in learning as described in my interview with Mr. Skvirsky. After researching and learning about human trafficking, student #4 was motivated by the learning moment to do



something. The role of an educator is to create moments where students experience learning in ways they never have discovered prior. Authentic learning experiences increase a student's ability to see new sights, hear new sounds, reach higher heights, and far exceed expectations.

In the Action Inspired Learning classroom model the relationship between the teacher and students is just as critical as the role that each individual plays in the learning experience. As stated earlier, the traditional history classroom places the teacher at the center and all information is disseminated from an individual teacher, therefore all learning revolves around a single source. In order to reverse the status quo of the traditional classroom, students must have agency over their learning as they are provided with opportunities to lead and own the learning experience. Instilling the indispensable values of democracy need to be the defining principles inside of a social studies classroom where the routines and procedures of learning consist of students thinking for themselves, making decisions, solving problems, leading their peers, and speaking up for issues they are passionate about. In his Seventh Letter, *From Talking to Learners to Talking to Them and With Them; From Listening to Learners to Being Heard by Them*, Paulo Freire states, "Speaking to and with the learners is an unpretentious but very positive way for democratic teachers to contribute in their school to the training of responsible and critical citizens, which we need so badly and which is indispensable to the development of our democracy."<sup>237</sup> Social studies classrooms should be incubators of democracy, where students are exposed to the democratic spirit of shared and equal rights, authority, and responsibility.

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<sup>237</sup> Paulo Freire, *Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 65.

Before a teacher can assume their critical role of inspiring and empowering their students to do something great with what they have learned and experienced; a solid relationship must be established. Trust is the cornerstone of all successful relationships and democratic classrooms. Additionally, trust is formed over time as students learn that their teacher is loyal, consistent, and exhibits a genuine warmth and sensitivity. Fostering a rapport with students evolves over time as trust is established and connections are made within the classroom throughout the context of learning. More importantly, trust must work both ways. To empower an individual, requires the person in authority to step aside and proportion out their authority by entrusting their power to the individual(s) under their care. There is an element of risk in empowering others; What if they make me look bad? What if the end product does not turn out the way I planned for? What if they drop the ball? Even though these are valid questions and concerns, there is such great potential for the reward to outweigh the risk when young people are tasked with accomplishing something of meaning and purpose. The questions that should guide the empowerment of young people are: What if they accomplish great and create a sustainable impact on society? What if adults listen to these young people and actually invoke change? What if these young people influence society to act and think differently? What if they really do change the world? What if students really do make history? A democratic classroom embraces the equality and freedom of every individual within its four walls to make decisions, solve problems, raise their voice, and assume leadership roles.

In the Project Stay Gold case study, the role of the educators involved was one of a facilitator. I viewed my role in the student-led project as a coach on the sideline; preparing students for their time to shine in big game moments. The role was simple, to

assist with providing resources, strategies, or guidance where needed and allow the students to lead the way. As the facilitator I often would say to the group of students, “what is your dream and how can I help make that dream a reality?” The leadership qualities exemplified by the PSG students were so extraordinary that they made the facilitator role a natural one to assume.

As discussed earlier in Chapter 2, Paulo Freire articulates how problem-posing education as the antidote to the oppressive ‘banking concept’ of an educational classroom. Freire not only confronts the contradiction between the teacher-student relationship, he proposes a dynamic solution. Freire found, “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.”<sup>238</sup> Furthermore, Freire establishes, together they become jointly responsible for the learning process.<sup>239</sup> When students engage in Action Inspired Learning, the role of the teacher as well as the students is similar to that of Freire’s problem-posing education solution. The teacher becomes the student and the student becomes the teacher. Essentially, there is a shared responsibility as a learning partnership is forged to allow the educational experience to empower every individual involved. Freire states, “The students-no longer docile listeners-are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher.”<sup>240</sup> In this concept, the teacher embraces all of the possibilities that will produce authentic learning experiences for all involved.

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<sup>238</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 81.

Freire's point that the "teacher is taught in dialogue with the students" captures my personal evolution as a history teacher, moving from a traditional to a progressive pedagogy. In a similar context as my students, I learned through doing. Prompting students with compelling, unanswerable, essential questions led me down the pathway of an inquiry-based instructional approach. Students became curious and interested in the questions as they felt a sense of empowerment to solve the questions with well-crafted, research-based answers. As the students assumed leadership roles and thrived as I trusted them to own and guide their learning; their achievements far exceeded my expectations. I discovered that I was learning with them and from them, and over time, trust was established to a point that I could turn over more responsibility to them. From this learning experience as a teacher, I was transformed by what I learned from my students. Action Inspired Learning projects are just as much about what the teacher can learn from their students as they are about what the students learn from their teacher. Experiencing the profound accomplishments of these students demonstrates the value of an inquiry-based instructional model as the importance of students encountering the transformative power of education through activism and participation in Action Inspired Learning.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), a contemporary of Project Stay Gold, shares an analogous philosophy in regards to the role of teacher in Action Inspired Learning. To learn more about YPAR, I interviewed Dr. Cathryn Devereaux, an Assistant Professor of Education at Drew University. In our conversation, Dr. Devereaux shared her experience as a facilitator of YPAR projects and we focused our attention on the role of the teacher and the role of the students. Dr. Devereaux emphasized the importance of the students leading the way on their journey. She explained that the heart and soul of

YPAR is to enable and inspire students to embrace the issues that are close to their hearts to further research, propose solutions, and bring about change on a grassroots level. Dr. Devereaux did reiterate the role of the teacher in YPAR is to move out of the way and provide students with the permission to let loose and be themselves. YPAR seeks to tear down the walls of the box and remove the limits and structures that prevent students from assuming leadership roles in making societal change. The interview with Dr. Devereaux validated the role of teacher in YPAR which is similar to the PSG case study and is consistent with Freire's problem-posing education solution. There must exist an unlearning for the adult involved to effectively shift the paradigm of authority to a shared and equal democratic learning process. The teacher then collaboratively facilitates the reality of the dreams and desires of the student-leaders as real solutions take form and shape and produce tangible results. Furthermore, the teacher's role is to provide perspective to enable students to clarify what they are attempting to accomplish. In my interview with Marc Shvirsky he stated, "reinforcing the power of what they have already done, is giving kids muscle."<sup>241</sup> Students ultimately can and will author an inspiring change narrative when they are guided, supported, and coached to do so.

## **HOW TO IMPLEMENT ACTION INSPIRED LEARNING**

To implement an Action Inspired Learning experience, students and educators should begin with discovering a current issue or societal problem that they can tangibly address by proposing practical and meaningful solutions. For some classrooms the issue may be an obvious one within their local community, and for others research may need to be conducted to discover where they desire to make a difference. This is where the

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<sup>241</sup> Marc Skvirsky, videoconference interview by the author, Lake Hopatcong, NJ, December 10, 2021.

trusted relationship between the teacher and students facilitates a critically important role. The teacher has the authority to open the door of possibility and has the authority to close the door as well. The current issue or human rights violation must connect to the course curriculum and the state standards. Here the teacher will use professional judgement and responsibility to determine the viability of the connection. Additionally, if students desire to address an issue that is controversial in nature, the teacher in consultation with a department supervisor or building administrator can decide how to move the students' focus into a different direction. Beyond that point, this is an opportunity for the educator to provide the students with a different perspective, and that discussion could change that students' worldview forever. It is important for students to view an issue through multiple lenses and different perspectives before making definitive decisions. Educators have the unique opportunity to provide students with new and exciting perspectives on the world around and potential to change that for the good.

In selecting a global issue, community problem, or human rights violation, teachers can consult the *17 Sustainable Development Goals* created by the United Nations. Some of these goals include, Goal 1 - No Poverty, Goal 2 - Zero Hunger, Goal 3 - Good Health & Well Being, Goal 4 - Quality Education, Goal 5 - Gender Equality, and Goal 6 - Clean Water & Sanitation, to name a few.<sup>242</sup> The *Sustainable Development Goals* encompass many suggestions and examples for young people to learn about and then decide if they desire to engage one or more of the goals.

Another valuable resource provided by the United Nations, Amnesty International's, *Becoming a Human Rights Friendly School: A guide for schools around*

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<sup>242</sup> United Nations, The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

*the world*, offers practical examples of how to integrate human rights topics inside of a classroom. The purpose of the toolkit is to explain, “how the 10 global Principles for Human Rights Friendly Schools can be integrated into four key areas of school life: governance, relationships, curriculum and extra-curricular activities, and school environment. It describes the steps schools can take to plan and implement the project.”<sup>243</sup> For individuals interested in participating in an Action Inspired Learning project, Amnesty International is an ideal resource to consult. Once again, it is imperative that the project connects directly with the school district’s curriculum and state approved standards.

#### HOW TO IMPLEMENT ACTION INSPIRED LEARNING



Figure 5 | How to Implement Action Inspired Learning

<sup>243</sup> Amnesty International, "Becoming a Human Rights Friendly School: A guide for schools around the world," Amnesty International, last modified September 14, 2012, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol32/001/2012/en/>.

## **STEP 1: RESEARCH**

When the classroom community comes to an agreement on the issue to engage; the first step is to begin with the research process. As stated in Chapter 2, John Dewey's 6 Steps of Reflective Practice outline a framework for solving a problem or confronting an issue. Dewey believed that the six steps to solving a problem include: 1. Define the Problem, 2. Establish Criteria (standards by which the solution will be judged), 3. Analyze the Problem, 4. Suggest Possible Solutions, 5. Evaluate Each Solution and Select The Best One, 6. Suggest Ways of Testing or Carry Out the Solution.<sup>244</sup> For the first six months, the students of PSG focused their energy on the research process; it is critical for students to know and understand the nuances and details of an issue before they propose any solutions.

### **RESEARCH STEP: 1. Define the Problem**

Using Project Stay Gold as an example, I will outline how the students applied Dewey's 6 Steps. The PSG students defined the problem of human trafficking as the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation. Through preliminary research, the students discovered that this human rights violation directly impacted their generation and they were in the primary age group of many victims. Human Trafficking, more specifically the exploitation of children assumed a deeper definition as they began to weave the connections to themselves and their peers. Additionally, the students defined the problem of human trafficking as a crime that exists everywhere, even within the county and township in which they live.

### **RESEARCH STEP: 2. Establish Criteria**

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<sup>244</sup> John Dewey, *How We Think*, reprint ed. (n.p.: Dover Publications, 1997).



Establishing criteria for their research was a simple standard for the students; how can we effectively communicate and articulate this issue to our peers and then in turn inspire them to take action as well. The criteria were defined in the effectiveness of communication. The students spent time determining, based upon the research behind human trafficking prevention among young people, how can we communicate the issue in a manner that maintains integrity of the research, yet also is relatable to young people. Identifying their intended audience as well as their mission defined the criteria by which the solution would be judged.

Another aspect of establishing the criteria for the research process is to make connections between the issue/problem with the themes and content of the curriculum. In the case of PSG, the students established multiple connections between slavery in America's past with modern forms of slavery. The students discovered a powerful influence by researching and studying the 19th century abolitionist movement and applied their strategies, words, and beliefs to their work in the 21st century. Essentially, the students discovered a blueprint on how to confront an issue such as modern day slavery from the abolitionist movement. Additionally, the students linked the name of their club to *The Outsiders*, a book they were reading in English language arts. Establishing connections between the curriculum and the research creates an opportunity for purpose in learning that enables the content to become even more important to a young person.

### **RESEARCH STEP: 3. Analyze the Problem**

In analyzing the global issue of human trafficking the students consulted many non-profit organizations working to prevent the crime. The students researched human

trafficking by reading through the Trafficking in Persons reports provided by the U.S. Department of State and the United Nations. Furthermore, scanning numerous non-profit organizational websites the students learned as much as they could about the issue. Quickly, they discovered the multiple facets of human trafficking and found that some non-profit organizations were dedicated solely to preventing forced labor in particular regions, where other organizations were focused on eradicating the sexual exploitation of children. Every non-profit organization possessed a different focus; somewhere concentrating their efforts internationally and others were focused domestically. Following months of research, the students decided to focus their efforts on domestic forms of trafficking, more specifically, how to prevent it in the state of New Jersey. Through the analysis of facts and statistics, survivor stories, as well as the effective work of many outstanding non-profit organizations the student possessed a solid understanding of the issue.

#### **RESEARCH STEP: 4. Suggest Possible Solutions**

Following months of research, the students determined that there was space for them to raise awareness about an issue which appeared to be hidden from the public consciousness. Initially, the students decided to create an awareness campaign in their middle school, following six months of research. The students designed awareness campaign posters with facts and statistics to display throughout the hallways. Every morning of the awareness week, they shared a fact about human trafficking during morning announcements. Additionally, during the week, the 8th grade students taught lessons on human trafficking to the 6th, 7th, & 8th grade social studies classes. The interactive lessons lasted for forty-five minutes as the students made curriculum

connections and prompted the students in the class to actively participate in responding to question prompts by turning an electric candle on or off. As the lessons came to an end, the students wanted to do more, they determined that students in other schools needed to hear their message as well. The students decided to make videos, launch a website, and use social media as platforms to communicate their solution to the problem. Furthermore, the students pursued opportunities to give presentations to the general public and lead school assemblies. Overall, they determined that a public awareness campaign led by students would be the solution they would suggest to prevent all forms of human trafficking in New Jersey and beyond.

#### **RESEARCH STEP: 5. Evaluate Each Solution and Select the Best One**

Students using their voice and talent to communicate an awareness message emerged as their most effective solution to preventing human trafficking among their generation. Over time Project Stay Gold students determined that they were not just raising awareness, they were using education as a means of prevention. Using the power of education became the focus of the students to influence and impact their peers throughout New Jersey and beyond. The PSG students believed if young people were aware of the risk factors and warning signs of human trafficking, that education would ultimately prevent them from ever being exploited.

#### **RESEARCH STEP: 6. Suggest Ways of Testing or Carry Out the Solution**

The students of Project Stay Gold relied heavily on the partnerships and relationships developed with individuals in law enforcement and nonprofit organizations who were experts in the field of combatting human trafficking. Oftentimes students would consult with content experts when writing a presentation to ensure that their

message was accurate and not misleading. As the students carried out their solutions, they received feedback, guidance, and direction along the way from leaders in the field and measured their progress on executing their solutions.

## **STEP 2: ORGANIZE & PLAN**

As students navigate through the research process of an issue, the next step in Action Inspired Research is to organize. The Project Stay Gold students met during lunch and after school once a week each time. During those meetings the students discussed their research discoveries and determined what the next steps would be. Early on the students recruited friends that were interested in being involved in the cause. PSG averaged 20-30 students each year who decided to devote some of their time to raising awareness about human trafficking. An advisor(s) who serves as a facilitator or coach is critical to the organizational structure of an Action Inspired Learning project. The advisor determines where the students will meet and provides required supervision inside of a school building. Once students commit to the project, they are expected to follow through on their commitment to the group.

With the advisor(s) in place and the group of students committed to the project, it is important to begin planning how to execute the solutions identified during the research process. In the first six months, the Project Stay Gold students planned an interactive lesson plan to deliver to social studies classes throughout the middle school, designed awareness posters for the hallways, communicated morning announcements, and decided to create a short video segment to serve as a public service announcement. Prior to the start of the summer recess, the students planned to maintain their momentum throughout the summer months as they wrote content for a website and planned more PSAs. The

work of designing and building the website continued throughout the fall months. In October, one year after the genesis of PSG the students filmed three more PSAs.

In regards to student membership, it should be noted that the founding group of eighth graders moved on to high school and a new group of students entered eighth grade with a desire to serve the mission of Project Stay Gold. The new group of students were so impacted by the human trafficking lesson they received in seventh grade from their peers that they made the decision to serve the cause when they had the opportunity. Fortunately, the middle and high schools in my school district were connected campuses which enabled the eighth and ninth graders to meet together after school. Recruitment into PSG was successful since students made a memorable impression on their peers, ultimately inspiring them to serve a cause greater than themselves.

Together, the eighth and ninth graders planned an awareness event for a Friday evening in early December. The purpose of the event was to showcase their new PSA videos, reveal their website, and most importantly, raise awareness among the attendees. The students promoted the event and determined that this would make a difference. All of their hard work was realized when more than two hundred individuals attended. The collaboration effort between the eighth and ninth graders was proved to be incredibly successful as together they accomplished the objective they determined to accomplish. As the students led the project, they relied on their advisors to assist with logistical challenges with the school, transportation, fund raising, etc. PSG continued to meet weekly to organize and plan school assemblies, presentations, the Not on Our Turf Super Bowl campaign, write scripts for more PSAs, create posts for social media, and collaborate on additional projects.

### STEP 3: TAKE ACTION

#### Execute the Solutions

Carrying out the mission is the primary objective of Action Inspired Learning. When students execute the solutions they determined in Step 1, they are doing something great with the knowledge and understanding they gained through the research process. More importantly, when the mission is executed, students gain a valuable learning experience and life lesson as their initial interest and passion, sparked by empathy to make a difference manifests itself in a tangible action. The National Council for the Social Studies emphasizes the importance of taking informed action in their College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. Embedding this skill in their state standards framework, it states, “Social studies is the ideal staging ground for taking informed action because of its unique role in preparing students for civic life.”<sup>245</sup> Furthermore, the C3 Framework states, “In social studies, students use disciplinary knowledge, skills, and perspectives to inquire about problems involved in public issues; deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues; take constructive, independent, and collaborative action; reflect on their actions; and create and sustain groups.”<sup>246</sup>

For example, one of the first ways the Project Stay Gold students took action was to organize a simple fundraising effort. The students made different colored wristbands that said Project Stay Gold on one side and abolitionists on the other. The students promoted wristbands throughout the school and in one day they sold more than 400

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<sup>245</sup>National Council for the Social Studies, "The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards," in *National Council for the Social Studies*, 62, last modified 2013, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/c3/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.pdf>.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, 62.

bracelets. At the conclusion of the fundraiser the students raised \$500.00 for a domestic anti-trafficking organization. They were confident that the money they donated to the organization was a solid first step in making a difference. Fundraisers are extremely common inside of a school community, therefore it is a great place for newly formed student-led groups to begin their efforts. Facilitating a fundraiser accomplishes two objectives; first, it creates an opportunity for students to promote their awareness message. Second, once the money is collected and donated to a reputable organization it provides the group with a strong sense of an accomplishment and evidence that they are making a difference.

Setting goals and establishing action steps are keys to executing the solutions as a student group begins to determine how they will make a difference. Starting with the end in mind and working backwards will enable any group to establish their action steps. In the case of PSG, the students were determined to create short video segments for a YouTube channel to inspire students in other school districts to learn about human trafficking. As a collective group, we determined what was required to accomplish this goal. Through much brainstorming, the students created concepts, wrote scripts, and determined the message they desired to communicate. As the facilitator, I reached out to a friend of mine who is a professional videographer and scheduled a time for him to meet with our students. During the meeting, the students articulated their vision for the video segments. Additionally, they shared their scripts with him and together they collaboratively created story boards for the videos. Once everything was established, we scheduled two different video shoot dates after school and successfully executed the vision of creating student-led public service announcements. Once the four videos were

completed the students promoted them through social media, emailed them to educators, placed them on YouTube, and premiered them at all future presentations. One year later, we learned that Picatinny Arsenal, United States Army base in Morris County, New Jersey used the student video in their annual human trafficking training for their staff and military personal.

### Form Partnerships

Reflecting back on the Project Stay Gold experience, one lesson that stands out are the partnerships we formed with organizations engaging in highly effective and inspiring work. As student groups research the human rights or social justice issue, they will discover non-profit organizations engaging the issue with similar objectives of making difference and executing solutions. These organizations could serve as solid examples for student groups to learn from and potentially partner with. Additionally, most organizations are seeking ways to engage young people in the issues they care about and when a student-led group reaches out, they will most likely engage and correspond with the students.

For example, Project Stay Gold established a relationship with the New Jersey branch of the Polaris Project, a national leader in anti-trafficking efforts. On two different occasions, leaders from Polaris visited with our students after school to provide further training and development of our student's understanding of the issue. During their time with the students, they shared a number of survivor stories that greatly impacted the students and in turn, influenced their future presentations as they shared some of those stories with other students through their assemblies and presentations. Additionally, the



students were invited to present alongside leaders from Polaris Project at an anti-trafficking conference in New Jersey.

Through a series of presentations, the Project Stay Gold students formed a relationship with the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking. The Coalition held monthly local meetings in which PSG students presented their campaign as well as attended. Many of the Coalition members served as mentors to PSG students, teaching them valuable lessons about advocacy. Experiencing the unwavering support of an organization such as the Coalition instilled confidence within the students and provided them with a beneficial experience with networking and forming partnerships. Furthermore, PSG and the Coalition collaborated together to raise awareness about the grim reality of human trafficking surrounding Super Bowl 48 in East Rutherford, New Jersey. The Coalition promoted the PSG PSAs on their website and through their social media platforms. Additionally, members of the Coalition promoted, attended, and participated in the Not on Our Turf event hosted at Caldwell University in which more than 35 schools were represented. Overall, the partnership with the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking greatly enabled PSG to achieve their mission and accomplish their goal of using education as a means of prevention. Executing solutions must be a collaborative effort both internally among the student-led group and their advisor(s) as well as externally with various members of society.

#### **STEP FOUR: ASSESS PROGRESS**

Assessing the effectiveness of Project Stay Gold' influence was an important aspect of the student's work. Initially, the students believed if they informed one individual about the crime of human trafficking they achieved success. Students gathered

data on the number of schools they connected with, the amount of students and teachers in attendance as metrics to gauge their impact. Following presentations, the students would send surveys to the participants seeking feedback to apply to future events. Within presentations students would embed polls or surveys to measure the knowledge of the audience which would inform the progress of their awareness campaign. Additionally, students routinely monitored traffic on social media accounts, the website, and YouTube channel. Through the assessment metrics established by the students, they were able to measure their impact in New Jersey and beyond.

There are limitless possibilities when educators and students are united by passion to make a difference in their communities and beyond. In Action Inspired Learning, once a cause(s) is agreed upon, students lead an extensive research process to learn as much about the cause in order to propose authentic solutions. Next, the students will determine how to execute their solutions as they organize and plan the methods in which they will engage their peers and their community. Finally, the students will take action; whether utilizing social media, giving presentations, launching a fundraising campaign, partnering with a nonprofit organization to support their efforts, teaching lessons to their peers, creating public service announcements, or any additional creative ways to engage the public.

## CHAPTER 7

### MAKING AN ENDURING DIFFERENCE

Action Inspired Learning empowers students and educators to make an enduring difference in their community, for a student-led organization or movement can and will maintain influence over time. The primary objective of Project Stay Gold was to educate their peers and inspire them to participate in preventing human trafficking through use of education to raise awareness. Peer to peer learning remained the focus of PSG for eight years. The students of PSG taught lessons to their peers, which, in turn, inspired students to join the extra-curricular activity. Student #5 described the experience of learning from a peer:

The first presentation I ever received on human trafficking was conducted by other middle and high school students. Seeing people my age speak so passionately and knowledgeably about a topic beyond the purview of our JTMS experiences was so inspiring. It was the first time I realized that as a young person, I was, in fact, capable of making a real difference. My dream was always to do something that made an impact on the world around me. This felt like a daunting goal at 13 years old, but Project Stay Gold made the goal not only possible, but within reach.<sup>247</sup>

As stated here, the student witnessed their peers one grade above making a difference, which, in turn, sparked a desire to learn more and motivated them to join the student-led movement when the opportunity presented itself. Student #5 emerged as one of the most effective leaders in high school, carried their passion onto college, and is currently working in the field of social justice. Furthermore, they attribute much of their passion to combat injustice to this moment in particular. It is clear that the peer lessons and interactions not only captivated the attention of their young audience; it inspired them to

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<sup>247</sup> Student #5, Google forms interview by the author.

participate in the student-led movement, which ultimately increased membership when the students entered high school. Therefore, peer to peer learning naturally can sustain a project and not limit it only to one group of passionate students. As students inspire their peers, they invite more young people to join in their cause. Sustainability can be fostered over time by placing an emphasis on students inspiring their peers, particularly in younger grades to learn the issue and participate in the project.

Teachers along with administrators play an important role in fostering an environment that is safe and conducive for students to not only participate in projects, but to create space and opportunities for students as well. As Project Stay Gold taught human trafficking related lessons to the middle school social studies classes, the teacher scheduled the lessons with their colleagues and the administration gave the approval. Along the way, the school administration approved room usage, morning announcements, guest speakers, and even invited the teacher and students to present their project to the board of education. Administrators play a critical role in supporting student projects, therefore it is important for teachers and students to seek their approval, advice, and feedback. School administrator made decisions about the direction of the curriculum, instruction, and professional development. Therefore, they can determine to move their school or district in a learning direction that advocates for the implementation of Action Inspired Learning projects and opportunities for their staff and students.

Project Stay Gold sought not only to inspire students inside of their own school district, they desired to inspire students throughout the state of New Jersey and beyond. The students decided to do the heavy lifting of starting Project Stay Gold chapters in other schools, cleverly titling them Anchors. A link to the chapters which focused on the

Chapter Manual published by the students outlining and explaining the necessary steps of starting a chapter is located on the Project Stay Gold website. Over time, five schools in New Jersey started a PSG Anchor. Following the founding students' lead, the newly formed chapters organized various awareness campaigns and used strategies to start the conversation about human trafficking inside their schools. Overall, the students were pleased with the fact that students in other districts were motivated to make a difference with their school communities as well.

Another example of sustainability are the ways in which Project Stay Gold students carried their passion to prevent human trafficking with them as they entered college. Student #14 launched a PSG chapter at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) toward the end of his freshman year in 2013. The student was diligent to find an advisor, write a constitution, and follow the protocols of the college to start the student-led group on his campus. The PSG chapter at TCNJ held large forums with hundreds of students in attendance to receive presentations from members of the Attorney General's Office, Homeland Security, and the FBI as well as leaders throughout the state. The PSG chapter at TCNJ actively engaged their campus with creative awareness campaigns and events to start the conversation among their peers by making them aware of the risk factors and warning signs of human trafficking.

Furthermore, student #8 started a PSG chapter on the campus of Dartmouth College in 2016. The chapter focused their efforts on raising awareness about forced labor, more specifically slavery in the supply chain of various products. The chapter generated interest among the student population and hosted successful awareness

campaigns. Student #8 is currently working in economics and is determined to continue to raise awareness to prevent the use of forced labor and slaves in the supply chain.

As a junior at Ithaca College, student #7 published an opinion article titled “Human Trafficking is Close to Home” in April 2019 for *The Ithacan*, an online publication. The student stated, “I started asking my college friends and other students what they know about human trafficking and discovered the majority of people were unaware of how prevalent it is in the U.S. Most college students view human trafficking as an issue that only occurs in other countries such as Thailand, Russia or China.”<sup>248</sup> The opinion article enabled this student to bring attention to the issue of human trafficking for the entire college to read and learn. The opinion piece with this statement, “The number one way to help prevent human trafficking is through awareness and education. Even just one voice advocating for a cause can make a difference. When people are aware that the problem can occur anywhere, they are able to help spot the signs, prevent it and stop it.”<sup>249</sup>

As students engage in Action Inspired Learning projects, sustainability can be measured through the assessing the effectiveness of peer to peer learning and focusing on the influence students have on one another. Another method to measure sustainability can be observed by the influence students have beyond high school on their college or university campuses. If students continue to raise awareness and make social justice issues a priority at the next level, their influence expands and their work is sustainable.

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<sup>248</sup> Student #7, "Commentary: Human trafficking is close to home," *The Ithacan* (blog), entry posted April 3, 2019, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://theithacan.org/opinion/commentary-human-trafficking-is-close-to-home/>.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

Even more important, are how the lessons learned from engaging a human rights issue or social justice cause transfer throughout the student's life and influence their career choices and civic participation as an adult. The students are not technically still involved in PSG; however, the lessons, skills, and competencies they developed have an enduring impact on their lives. Student #5 stated, "Through the presentations and demonstrations I did as a Project Stay Gold member, I cultivated my voice as an activist. Now, my life does not feel fulfilled if I am not using my voice to create change and advocate for others."<sup>250</sup> Student #7 stated, "I am at a turning point in my life where I am not too sure what the next thing is going to be that I will get involved in, but I know that due to all these experiences that I will never be satisfied with doing nothing. Whether it is a career I find or something I volunteer my personal time to, I plan to always be involved in service and working towards something I care about in some way."<sup>251</sup> Student #8 stated:

PSG has definitely influenced my civil participation as an adult! The whole organization focused around taking action and effecting change in the world around you. I have carried those lessons into my college and post-graduate life. I will forever think about my role in the world differently because of my work with PSG, whether it be through volunteering or participation in elections/awareness campaigns. I reached out to a women's group in Madison, WI (where I currently reside) who would meet monthly to raise awareness about human trafficking as Milwaukee and Chicago are massive hubs for traffickers in the US.<sup>252</sup>

Student #10 expressed, "That division of taking a big task (abolishing human trafficking) and turning it into a small task (having conversations) is an effective way of making huge progress over a long period of time. In other areas across my life I've seen the idea of

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<sup>250</sup> Student #5, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>251</sup> Student #7, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>252</sup> Student #8, Google forms interview by the author.

small and consistent progress to be the best/most effective avenue to success and I think that realization came from being in Project Stay Gold.”<sup>253</sup> Even though the students interviewed for this dissertation are between four to seven years removed from high school, they recognize the impact their learning experience has had on their lives, their worldview, and their responsibility as active citizens living in a democratic society. Action Inspired Learning creates a lasting impact on students as their learning experience endures long after their time in middle and high school as college students and active citizens. Experiential learning produces a long term impact as students make a difference in adulthood based on what they have experienced as a young person.

The outcome of an Action Inspired Learning experience produces learning that empowers students, has a purpose, and endures beyond the classroom. Students are motivated to engage in their personal learning journey when they experience passion from others, empathy for others, and agency to own their learning process. When young people assume leadership roles and seek to make a difference in the world around them, the underpinnings of Action Inspired Learning can be observed. The potential that a genuine learning experience has to impact a young person and the influence a group of young people can have on their community is also where Action Inspired Learning can be found. Action Inspired Learning provides the solution to the problems of compromised instruction of the social studies in primary grades, a scarcity of authentic learning experiences, and a lack of investment in civic and history education outlined in the first chapter.

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<sup>253</sup> Student #10, Google forms interview by the author.



Action Inspired Learning projects demonstrate what is possible when students are provided the time, resources, and agency to make a difference. Whether leading a fundraising campaign to rescue children from the fishing industry, building a school on the other side of the world, or successfully advocating for a bill to become a law, anything is possible for a group of committed and determined young people. Students must be provided with the opportunity to serve a cause greater than themselves, and the social studies discipline is an ideal platform for young people to engage in meaningful and authentic projects to make a difference and facilitate a positive contribution to their community.

The first problem identified in chapter one analyzed the issue of compromised instructional time in primary grades. The findings of *The State of Civic Education in Massachusetts* report recommend, “invest in developing resources and professional learning opportunities specifically designed for elementary educators and designed to address gaps for middle and high school educators.”<sup>254</sup> Additionally, the report recommends, “Provide elementary school teachers with more time to teach social studies by carving out time in the existing schedule, more classroom resources to teach civics, and more PD on how to integrate civics across subject areas.”<sup>255</sup> Providing time, resources, and professional development in primary grades would prioritize social studies education by addressing two areas of critical lack within the discipline.

Action Inspired Learning additionally includes leading others in Service Learning projects; essentially creating opportunities for others to learning through an authentic

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<sup>254</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, *The State of Civic Education in Massachusetts*, comp. Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, [Page #], accessed February 6, 2022, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-civic-education-massachusetts>.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

experience. Even though social studies instruction receives less time and attention in most elementary schools, it is critical to recognize that Action Inspired Learning projects can exist and thrive outside of the minimal amount of time allocated within a teacher's schedule. For example, in 2018 the students of Project Stay Gold led Operation Safe Home, a district wide fundraising campaign to raise \$30,000 to build a safe home in Kenya, Africa for Chief Joseph and his Maasai Tribe. Through multiple fundraisers, students in the primary grades collectively raised more than \$11,000 over the course of a year and half. Inside of the classroom the teachers used their social studies time to research and learn about the Maasai Tribe as they discovered many fascinating facts about their culture and way of life. Chief Joseph visited two of the elementary schools in the district and met the students through an assembly. As the building project in Kenya sent updates of their progress, the teachers would share the pictures with their students, and they observed the impact of their fundraising efforts. This project enabled the elementary students to experience their learning through participation in a cause that enhanced their learning within the social studies instructional time.

Ultimately, Action Inspired Learning provides a solution to the compromised instructional time in elementary schools by creating opportunities for teachers to engage their students in a long-term, sustainable, student-centered project that exists inside as well as outside of instructional confines of the daily schedule. Action Inspired Learning demonstrates the importance of applying the concepts of a social studies curriculum in the primary grades; as students learn about men and women who made a difference and are remembered for their positive contributions, students have the opportunity to do the same. Chapter 1 includes former elementary school teacher Ann Duque's concern that

students have an inability to understand how to process and explain the complexity of the world around them.<sup>256</sup> Action Inspired Learning experiences are a solution creating dynamic and authentic opportunities for young students to begin understanding some of the complexities of the world around them. As students research issues inside of their communities, organize and lead efforts to provide solutions, and take action, they will learn essential skills and begin to witness the difference they can make.

Secondly, Action Inspired Learning is the answer to the scarcity of authentic learning experiences within the social studies discipline. As evidenced in the student interviews, learning through experience manifests a long-term impact on young people and the empirical manifestations occur well beyond their middle or high school years and deeply impact their college, career, and civic participation. In *Education and Experience*, John Dewey wrote, “if an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future, continuity works in a very different way. Every experience is a moving force.”<sup>257</sup> The methods and practices by which Essentialism translates within social studies classrooms is void of authentic experiences; therefore, learning is not ignited and students are left without the opportunity to discover initiatives and desires that education can truly deliver.

It is difficult for students to experience real and authentic learning when the expectation of the classroom is for young people to merely be compliant and passive

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<sup>256</sup> Sarah Gosner, "How social studies can help young kids make sense of the world," The Hechinger Report, last modified July 12, 2018, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://hechingerreport.org/how-social-studies-can-help-young-kids-make-sense-of-the-world/>.

<sup>257</sup> John Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 38.

learners. There is no argument that there is room in education for essentialism; students must learn the critically essential skills of reading, writing, math, science, history, world languages, and technology to be prepared for college and career. However, if a student is learning inside of a classroom where the teacher and a textbook is the only source of the dissemination of information, students will not learn experientially. Action Inspired Learning shifts the classroom environment from a teacher-centered instructional model of learning to one that is student-centered. Students are trusted with leadership opportunities and have the autonomy to direct their own learning. Furthermore, collaboration is sparse or even nonexistent in a teacher-centered classroom; therefore, the student-centered learning experience of Action Inspired Learning promotes student/teacher collaboration as everyone is united in a collective vision and mission of making a difference.

The NAEP assessment data reveals a sharp decline in student achievement and proficiency when questioned about United States History and Civics related themes. Action Inspired Learning makes relevant connections between global and societal issues with history and civics which inspires students to learn the content outlined in the standards aligned curriculum in different ways. As students engage in authentic learning experiences, they are deeply determined to expand and enrich their learning. PSG student #10 stated, “We can apply lessons from our history to problems that we are currently experiencing in our society. From studying history it is possible to see patterns or behaviors that were effective in addressing issues (or not effective) and try to repeat/avoid the patterns or behaviors in addressing those modern day issues.”<sup>258</sup> Accessing history by making connections between the past and the present motivates

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<sup>258</sup> Student #10, Google forms interview by the author.

students to learn even more about history/civics, for their learning now has purpose.

Student #15 stated, “My experience with Project Stay Gold has definitely influenced my opinion of government and the community. I’ve voted strongly during elections and intend to one day be involved with local government when I settle down in a particular area.”<sup>259</sup> The impact of experiential learning is evident within the student reflections.

Students demonstrate how their own understanding of history and civics have been greatly impacted by their service in an Action Inspired Learning project. If students truly experienced learning that inspired them to take action and educators truly supported them to act, their educational experience would be similar to that of the PSG student’s authentic learning experience.

Third, Action Inspired Learning provides definitive solutions to the civic deserts which are a manifestation of a lack of investment into history and civic education. Even though the social studies discipline could greatly benefit from financial investments resulting in grants and scholarships, a large investment of time, attention, and resources would motivate and inspire greater numbers of young people as well as educators to engage societal concerns and global issues. On September 23, 2013 I was humbled by the opportunity to testify before the United States Senate’s Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. I stressed the importance of a partnership between schools and the government to combat and prevent human trafficking among young people. One example I communicated in my testimony states, “the availability of federal grants for student organizations that meet certain requirements to organize abolitionist movements in their schools and communities, would provide the necessary resources for

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<sup>259</sup> Student #15, Google forms interview by the author.

student organizations to succeed.”<sup>260</sup> For example, H.R.5150 - Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2021 includes federal grants and financial resources for anti-trafficking efforts inside of schools in section 101, “these Health and Human Services (HHS) grants train elementary and secondary school teachers, children, guardians, and trainers in the recognition, response, and prevention of child trafficking.”<sup>261</sup>

Action Inspired Learning projects influence young people and educators to engage the political process to determine the direction of proposed legislation. Successful projects demonstrate the worthy investment of state and federal funds to support the valiant efforts of students determined to make a difference by affecting change in their surrounding community. The accomplishments of distinguished student projects such as Project Stay Gold, Breaking the Chain Through Education, and YPAR illustrate what young people can and will accomplish when adults make substantial investments of time, energy, and resources into their mission and vision. The experiences of students involved in Action Inspired Learning projects demonstrate the difference young people can make when provided the opportunity. Therefore, investing in history and civics education projects could increase the amount of student-led initiatives across the nation as young people seek to make a difference in the world around them. Action Inspired Learning

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<sup>260</sup> *Combatting Human Trafficking: Hearings Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs* (2013) (statement of Daniel Papa), 3.

<sup>261</sup> H.R.5150 - Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2021, H.R. 5150, 117th Cong. (as introduced, Sept. 9, 2021). Accessed February 10, 2022. <http://congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/5150/text>.

projects demonstrate what can be accomplished when small investments are deposited into young people.

The student interview responses highlight the direct impact of authentic learning experiences had on the students during middle and high school. Action Inspired Learning is an instructional practice that extends learning beyond the classroom as well as the textbook. When students are inspired by their learning experiences to take action they are thinking at a deeply critical cognitive level. As students participate in an Action Inspired Learning project they have agency over their mission which amplifies their voices and provides leadership opportunities. Therefore, empowering students to own their learning by doing something profound with the knowledge they have gained by making connections to the curriculum, researching current issues, proposing bold solutions, and communicating and advancing those solutions to ultimately make a difference in their community and beyond.

Every student participant in the interview process each expressed the desire as a young person to make a difference. As middle and high students, the participants dedicated themselves to raising awareness about human trafficking in community and beyond. They spent countless hours after school, over summer break, and time on weekends to advance their mission and vision. The participants were highly motivated by passion, empathy, and agency to make a difference. Student #5 expressed, “My dream was always to do something that made an impact on the world around me. This felt like a daunting goal at 13 years old, but Project Stay Gold made the goal not only possible, but within reach.”<sup>262</sup> Student #12 expressed, “Upon learning about modern day slavery in middle school, I

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<sup>262</sup> Student #5, Google forms interview by the author.

remember feeling completely astonished that such evil existed in the world. In that moment of disbelief and fear, I felt an obligation to do my part and spread awareness.”<sup>263</sup>

Student #16 expressed, “In terms of pure motivation, I considered it a duty as a young person to advocate for people my own age trapped in cycles of abuse, manipulation and oppression. Raising awareness through education was the best tool we had to try and make a difference.” The common thread running through each student statement is an inspiration within to do something great and an opportunity to make a difference. Therefore, the instructional practices and pedagogical methodologies of self-directed research, problem solving, proposing solutions, designing communication strategies, student-leadership, marketing, and collaboration are all embodied within Action Inspired Learning.

Ultimately, Action Inspired Learning motivates social studies students to make history by advocating for a cause that produces real and effective change within their communities.

Of the sixteen participants who completed the interview process, ten described their lives forever impacted by the experience in Project Stay Gold by selecting a 10 on the 0 to 10 linear scale. Five students selected a 9 on the linear scale and one selected a 6. Ninety-four percent of the participants determined that the authentic learning experience of PSG forever impacted their lives. The evidence contained in the participant’s interview responses reveal the deep and lasting impact their experiences have had on shaping their worldview, how they see themselves as participants in society, and the personal responsibility they assume to improve the world around them for the better. Listed below are all sixteen responses by the participants to the question: If you could summarize one

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<sup>263</sup> Student #12, Google forms interview by the author.



life lesson you learned from your involvement in Project Stay Gold, what would that lesson be?

Student #1: “If there is a change that you want to occur, act on it. Spread awareness. Press the right buttons and don't ever give up.”<sup>264</sup>

Student #2: “If I had to summarize what I learned from Project Stay Gold in one sentence, it would be “Go for it.” I have been held back by shyness and anxiety for the majority of my life. Due to personal reasons, I had an extremely difficult time being involved in any school or social activities. Despite my strong need to help others and be involved in humanitarian work, it is always hard for me to overcome internal barriers. Even though I still have that struggle, I realized that to fulfill my need to help others, even a small step can make a difference. I was extremely proud of myself and those around me. We all learned that we were capable of more than we thought. If I go for it and take one step at a time, I can get through it, especially surrounded by smart, kind, and supportive people.”<sup>265</sup>

Student #3: “If you're not fighting for what's right, you're enabling injustice to continue. In other words, if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. Being in PSG made me realize that I can't just expect others to fix any issues occurring in society because if everyone did that, nothing would change.”<sup>266</sup>

Student #4: “One life lesson, among many, that I learned from my involvement in Project Stay Gold is how motivated young people can be to participate in activism and how the way young people are taught can vastly influence this motivation. This is knowledge that I will continue to embrace throughout my life, as someone who hopes to become a parent and pursue a career that involves educating youth about history. This lesson that I gained from being involved in Project Stay Gold plays a large role in my desire to pursue a career in public history, during which I hope to play a role in how history is consumed by young people in a way that encourages them to take action in the present as they learn about the past.”<sup>267</sup>

Student #5: “Young people have the power and the passion to save the world.”<sup>268</sup>

Student #6: “One life lesson I learned from PSG was that anyone can make a difference. At the time PSG was started, we were middle schoolers. The topic of human trafficking can be a challenging and sensitive one to tackle -- one that you'd think would go right

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<sup>264</sup> Student #1, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>265</sup> Student #2, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>266</sup> Student #3, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>267</sup> Student #4, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>268</sup> Student #5, Google forms interview by the author.

over the head of the average 13-year-old. We had some extraordinary achievements with our time in PSG, and truly sought change in the world around us.”<sup>269</sup>

Student #7: “That I can make an impact, no matter how big or small that may be, it matters.”<sup>270</sup>

Student #8: “Young people have an incredible sensitivity to injustice and will mobilize to help as much as they can. It's inspiring to think about because even as a 23-year-old, I can already see myself sometimes getting bogged down by the minutiae (job, work, groceries, etc.). The future of this country and world rests upon the shoulders of youth everywhere who can recognize the issues before them and take action!”<sup>271</sup>

Student #9: “It is always a reminder to me that it is possible for anyone to make a difference in anything no matter how big or how small the contribution. It just takes a little bit of passion, the best parts of yourself, and a whole lot of love for humanity.”<sup>272</sup>

Student #10: “Small consistent contributions are the most effective way to make a big difference over a long period of time. PSG was an example of this because after telling people about human trafficking we asked them to tell at least just one person that they knew about what they had learned. That division of taking a big task (abolishing human trafficking) and turning it into a small task (having conversations) is an effective way of making huge progress over a long period of time. In other areas across my life I've seen the idea of small and consistent progress to be the best/most effective avenue to success and I think that realization came from being in PSG.”<sup>273</sup>

Student #11: “Through my work with Project Stay Gold, I came to understand that some of the greatest injustices in the world are invisible to the average person. People must have passion for helping others and always keep an investigative eye on the troubles that lurk beneath the surface of society. It is nowhere near sufficient to read or watch the news to get a comprehensive understanding of the world; rather, an all too common fault in our society is fully absorbing the "news" provided by corporate, power-aligned media and treating it as an unquestionable, consummate knowledge of the world. It takes a passionate, caring, loving, inquisitive, questioning, open-minded, and truth-seeking attitude to discover reality. And that reality is not as simple and pretty as the one we would like to believe exists, but its seemingly imperceptible manifestations are too real. We must search earnestly for truth and confront the dark side of reality by exposing it so that justice can take place. Only by living in truth and challenging its enemies can we all live meaningful, peaceful lives.”<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Student #6, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>270</sup> Student #7, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>271</sup> Student #8, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>272</sup> Student #9, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>273</sup> Student #10, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>274</sup> Student #11, Google forms interview by the author.

Student #12: “Be the change you want to see in the world. Young voices are powerful!”<sup>275</sup>

Student #13: “An individual's passion and a group's passion about an issue can actually bring about change for vulnerable groups.”<sup>276</sup>

Student #14: “The reality is that that emotion and energy in itself is not enough to make the change you want to see. It's a long, hard, and challenging process of setting up strategy, incorporating people with appropriate skills, and coordinating with people in positions with resources that can help you accomplish the goals that you have.”<sup>277</sup>

Student #15: “Everything I learned from Project Stay Gold was positive and benefitted my growth. It was truly an honor to be a part of and I'm so grateful for all the experiences it brought me. A major life lesson I learned was that you are never too young to have a voice. I honestly had no idea that PSG would take off and that adults would take us seriously. When PSG first started I was only 14 at the time and I had no idea that we would be able to make any difference at all.”<sup>278</sup>

Student #16: “Young people can make a difference when they are motivated and connected to issues that mean something to them.”<sup>279</sup>

In 2017, I had a conversation with student #5 after returning home from a semester of school. In that conversation, the student mentioned that their major was journalism and communicated their determination to be a journalist that exposed human trafficking. In a subsequent conversation with student #8, they described their future goals as an economics major and explained how they desired to ensure slave free practices where ever they would have the ability to influence those types of decisions. Recently, student #15 sent me a message on social media and expressed how they were in the process of applying for a school counselor job and they wanted to start a Project Stay Gold chapter wherever they were hired. These anecdotal conversations further highlight and accentuate the influence Project Stay Gold continues to have on them as they carry

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<sup>275</sup> Student #12, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>276</sup> Student #13, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>277</sup> Student #14, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>278</sup> Student #15, Google forms interview by the author.

<sup>279</sup> Student #16, Google forms interview by the author.

that impact with them throughout their lives. Four of the sixteen participants interviewed pursued a major in history or history-related fields of study. Three students pursued a major in education related fields. Despite their major of study, they communicated how they will continue their passion of advancing social justice causes whether in medicine, economics, public policy, or journalism.

The student statements clearly demonstrate how the authentic learning experiences in middle and high school influenced and impacted their worldview and how they see themselves in the world. They realized that they, themselves can make a real difference in the world through participation in social justice causes, human rights issues, and civic engagement. Furthermore, the videos, resources, and materials they designed and created as middle and high school students continue to impact young people and educators through the website as organizations that continue to promote and highlight their accomplishments and message. As stated earlier, the purpose of social studies education is to prepare young people to think critically about the world around them and to contribute to society through active citizenship, leadership, and service. The statements and reflections provided by the students interviewed for this dissertation thoroughly exhibit how Action Inspired Learning has influenced them to think critically and become active citizens who assume leadership roles with an authentically intrinsic desire to serve their community. The students themselves are the manifestation as well as the evidence of the transformative capability of education, captured through Action Inspired Learning. The students promoted education as a means to change the world and ultimately, education changed them. These students will undoubtedly view their role in the world differently, and in turn have a keen sense of how to improve the world around them. They

simply learned about a human rights violation and decided to do something about it; their learning experience inspired them to act.

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