The effects of Holocaust education and learning about diversity on student self-integration in a middle school classroom

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Abstract
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The Effects of Holocaust Education and Learning about Diversity On Student Self-Integration in a Middle School Classroom

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Elaine Coughlin
First Reader

Alfonso Lopez-Vasquez
Second Reader
The Effects of Holocaust Education and Learning about Diversity on Student Self-Integration in a Middle School Classroom.

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Names of student-chosen group members for a ten-minute reading activity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Group 4</th>
<th>Group 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>Lavada</td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Javi</td>
<td>Amy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Tammy</td>
<td>Marisela</td>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>Linda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>Latrell</td>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>Jorge</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Gaby</td>
<td>Everardo</td>
<td>Nancy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knots of students are gathered in various forms throughout a warm September classroom.

Group #1, Javi, Victor, Jorge, and Everardo, read Gary Soto’s “Born Worker” quietly to each other, their reading punctuated by laughter at times, discussion and notes at others.

Group #2, Trevor, Susan, Ethan, and Mark are busily cross-checking their notes on “The Bet” by Anton Chekhov. Fourth period goes smoothly, as student-chosen reading groups finish on time and submit their reading responses while exiting Mr. Markealli’s Language Arts room. At lunch, Group #1 are joined by Esteban and Diego, while Group #2 meets up with Cyndi and Taylor. These lists of names represent the culturally diverse students I recently taught in an eighth grade class. These lists of names also represent the lack of self-integration I observe not only in my own classroom, but also at large in the middle school where I teach. Of course, when teachers choose cooperative groups for students, it forces the issue of working in a somewhat more multicultural setting, but teacher-chosen groups belie the realities of how students at my school self-segregate based on delineations of ethnicity, gender, body shape, academic ability, or other human qualities. Would students self-integrate more if they were taught about the devastating effects of prejudice and segregation wrought by Nazi Germany during The Holocaust of World War II? Would students self-integrate more if they knew more about the other students in the classroom whom they have not yet had a chance to meet?
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Studies related to students learning about the ethnic diversity of other students reveal that feeling either included or disenfranchised has significant effects on a student’s academic achievement and psychological well being. When students are given the opportunity to learn about the diversity of other students and work together with them in the classroom, it leads to increased feelings of acceptance and self-efficacy. When students feel they are on the inside rather than the outskirts of the social domain in the classroom, they are more likely to contribute ideas to class, participate in learning activities, and remain academically and disciplinarily sound. (Grant et al., Dhindsa et al, Mpofu and Thomas, “Mutual Learning…”, “Promoting Academic Achievement…”, Shechtman, Nye et al., Walker) Conversely, when students feel marginalized, invisible, or otherwise alienated, they are more likely to get involved in socially negative behaviors, such as gang activity, dropping out of school, and relating poorly with others unlike them. (Brown et al., Whaley and Smyer)

None of the studies reviewed dealt specifically with the concept of teaching about diversity and then observing its effects on student self-integration (when students choose to partner or group with students unlike themselves based on differences such as gender, physicality, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.)

Significance of the Study

This study may add to the professional understanding of the necessary level of facilitator intervention in establishing a classroom that validates and practices diversity without “having” to. This study may also add to the professional understanding of why students choose not to self-integrate. This study adds to the verification of the value of teaching
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multicultural literature and diversity, and whether or not it influences its participants. This study will raise awareness in its participants of the idea that everyone must be included in a community if the community is to thrive; perhaps the participants in the study become increasingly expert in understanding diversity. This study may also help reduce the number of conflicts in the classroom based on diversity.

All students can learn, but only if certain psychological needs are met. Teachers must understand, in the increasingly diverse classrooms of the world, how to ensure that each individual student in the classroom feels socially safe and accepted if we expect students to stay in school and become the leaders and sustainers of a stable society.

Research Questions

This ethnographic study attempts to examine the effects of teaching about The Holocaust of World War II and diversity awareness on student self-integration in 8th grade classrooms at a multiethnic suburban middle school.

Definition of Terms

Self-integration means that students choose to partner or group diversely when it is not required by the facilitator of the lesson. Multicultural education is when students learn about norms of other cultures that exist in the world at large. Diversity education is when students learn about the ways people can be different (e.g. physically, racially, gender-wise, socio-economically) and still participate fully in a community. Sociometry is the identification of the social order of a group of people, for example with whom students would most or least likely wish to work in a small group.
Sonia Nieto provides the most comprehensive summary of what has been found in the research to date, commenting that,

"Although the connection of multicultural education with students' rights and responsibilities in a democracy is unmistakable, many young people do not learn about these responsibilities, the challenges of social democracy, or the central role of citizens in ensuring and maintaining the privileges of democracy. Multicultural education can have a great impact in this respect. A multicultural perspective presumes that classrooms should not simply allow discussions that focus on social justice, but in fact welcome them. These discussions might center on concerns that affect culturally diverse communities – poverty, discrimination, war, the national budget – and what students can do to change them. Because all of these concerns are pluralistic, education must of necessity be multicultural." (Nieto, 2002, p.41)

Ultimately, it is more meaningful for a society to have the students self-integrate rather than it being a matter of good teachers forcing the issue, since self-integrating behavior would indicate that students have embraced the ideals of social democracy.

The overwhelming majority of the body of the research conducted on the impact of increasing multicultural teaching practices and helping students understand the diversity of the classroom echoes Sonia Nieto's powerful summary of the current reality of education in the United States; education must of necessity be multicultural.

For teachers of middle grades and high school, the importance of teaching students to work together more diversely becomes even more evident, as studies show feelings of alienation..."
linked to many negatives in the futures of students, namely dropping out of school and poor relationships with others; “Adolescent alienation is real. That is, to some degree all adolescents experience some form of alienation.” (Brown, Higgins, Pierce, Hong, Thoma, 2003)

**Negatives of Non-Diverse Education**

The localized negative effects of allowing students to continually choose not to work in diverse partnerships or groups are devastating. Adolescent students have an innate sense of justice that, if challenged, can lead to potential emotional harm. (Nieto 41) Zipora Shechtman cited Brown and Harter in identifying that adolescents’ sense of identity is inextricable from peer sociometry. (Shechtman) Additionally, gender plays a role in which groups are more likely to have feeling of alienation and “meaninglessness.” (Brown et. al.)

In the short term, these feelings of alienation among students who feel disenfranchised in the classroom also have powerful consequences on students’ levels of frustration, self-concept, and alienation. These feelings are often prevalent in schools where decision-making is limited to small groups of students or faculty and the majority of students are excluded from the process. (Brown et. al) Another study echoed the fact that being viewed positively by one’s peers had terrific impact on students’ feelings of worth. (Whaley and Smyer)

Additionally, a systemic look at problems based on segregation of students, whether intentional or unintentional, indicated the importance of completing a triangular structure of support in the actual desegregation of classrooms. Not only is it critical for students to
recognize, respect, and value differences between and among students, but heavy responsibility also falls on teachers' and parents' shoulders.

Zipora Schechtman cites Arends' and Schmuck and Schmuck's assertions that, "One of the critical executive functions attributed to teachers is to provide leadership for building a warm and constructive classroom environment in which relationships and social inclusion are enhanced, largely via classroom discussion and discourse (Arends, 1991; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). However, teachers often lack the knowledge and skills to promote such relationships." Not only are teachers the content leaders in the classroom, but additionally teachers must remember that classroom culture and environment are essential for students' ability to access content. Teachers, to widely varying degrees, are either expert or incompetent when it comes to providing the leadership necessary for an inclusive classroom.

Without the kind of classroom leadership that creates potential for all students to excel and feel respected for that excellence, repercussions are felt not only by students but potentially by society at large. Students rarely feel neutral about their short-term experiences in a classroom or, perhaps more importantly, their long term experiences in a school system. "Cognitive-affective variables, such as academic self-concept (as well as other areas of perceived competence), alienation from school, and mistrust of the larger society have been found to be correlated with the academic motivation of students of African descent in the U.S. public school system." (Whaley and Smyer) When a student graduates, is perhaps 'pushed through' the school system, or worse, mistrust of larger society could have lasting negative effects on that student's perception of self, others, and local, state, and federal governments. What is reality to a member of a society who has lost trust in that society?
If that trust can be seeded, nurtured, and grown, the implications are just as far-reaching for the positive. Whaley and Smyer cite Smyer in stating, "In fact, Smyer (1991) found that cultural mistrust was correlated with both global self-worth and perceived job competence." (Whaley and Smyer) If the individual trusts society, global self-worth and job competence increase; if the individual mistrusts, these factors decrease. It is a simple equation, difficult and financially expensive to achieve in society, but the sociological alternative is devastating.

Certain communities have embraced the idea of eliminating, or at least limiting environments contributing to societal mistrust. Apparently, there are systemic forces at work reducing academic integration. "Outreach programs have become increasingly critical in addressing the "academic pipeline problem" and increasing campus diversity in California, where race and ethnicity have been removed as considerations for admission to the states' public university systems (Hayward, Brandes, Kirst, & Mazzeo, 1997)." If America's public universities are reducing efforts at diversity, it would follow that culturally diverse students who are actually admitted to the schools would feel less included based on student minority numbers alone.

The state university systems' problems exacerbate the established trend among ethnic and, likely, a variety of non-majority student groups. Walker cites Corbett and Wilson and Ferguson to illustrate the feelings and perceptions of minority students. "Students report various ways in which teachers make their disinterest apparent; level of classroom discipline, academic expectations, challenging work, and caring are all indicators for students of teachers' interest in them as students and human beings (Corbett & Wilson, 2002; Delpit, 1995). For example, the Black male high school students in Polite's study
characterized the majority of their teachers and counselors as "uncaring" because of their perceived disinterest in student coursework. Similar to Polite's study, Ferguson (2002) found that Black students placed a greater premium than students from other groups on the role of teacher encouragement in their academic progress. If a student feels invisible, then, pragmatically, they are.

Additionally, it is important to note that students place a high premium not only on teachers' attentions, but the attention of one or both parents. Another problem school systems must confront, as noted by Walker who cites Auerbach and Delpit, is the fact that parents of minority students often harbor feelings of mistrust and hostility towards schools. Walker goes on to suggest, citing Yan, that school staff may think minority parents are uncaring or ignorant. Additionally, Walker indicates that Auerbach and Delpit assert that schools assume parents are disinterested based solely on lack of attendance at back to school nights. (Walker) Many minority parents do not keep nine-to-five jobs, and as a result, back-to-school nights are often held during work shifts. Parents might feel more welcome at school if school made more effort to make schedules equitable, with functions being held during school hours as well as after school. Perhaps in the future schools will hold back-to-school days as well as nights.

**Positives of Diverse Education**

Working together in diverse groups gives all students the opportunity to preserve the “self”, as Kohl’s (as cited in Nieto, 2002) observes: “More recently, Herbert Kohl (1995) suggested that students’ failure to learn is not always caused by lack of intelligence, motivation, or self-esteem. On the contrary, he maintained that “to agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major ‘loss of self’…” (Nieto, 2002)
More studies showed that students who felt included in the classroom had better academic success and perceptions of themselves. Smith describes that, "...one persistent research finding is the fact that student involvement with campus groups that reflect personal, cultural, or service interests have a strong impact on helping students feel that they belong on the campus, are contributing to the campus, and have their interests reflected in the institutional structure." (29) Nye, in studying a small classroom where every student got more attention, found that, small classes produced lasting benefits in minority students' reading." (Nye et al.) Another small study of students in a music classroom where abilities and skill levels were diverse revealed that peer learning is not based so much in skills as it is in the process of discovery, and that peers help this process. (Mutual Learning and Democratic Action in Instrumental Music Education)

One need not worry that because one group of students feels better about themselves that a thriving majority will suffer, as was evidenced in a study that increased the number of African-American students in a predominantly Caucasian classroom. (Mpofu and Thomas) Another study also found that it will not be as difficult to tap into the familial resources of diverse student populations, which may be another concern of the majority. (Walker) One researcher concluded, after studying students in a science classroom, that diversity in work groups led to deeper student understanding of science. (Dhindsa et al.) In a study aimed at increasing social diversity in an Israeli classroom, secondary-level students grew in their acceptance of special-needs students. (Shechtman)

Participants in the music room study found that when randomness was applied to group selection, they felt better about it, and were able to readily accept the task of working in a diverse group. (Mutual Learning and Democratic Action in Instrumental Music Education)

Diverse students who experienced educational programs that encouraged and incorporated
a respect for and focus on diversity in their approaches were energized and enthusiastic about their experiences, as evidenced in another study where a student noticed the painful difference in equity between the experimental class aimed at emphasizing diversity and the experiences of past classrooms. (Promoting Academic Achievement and Identity Development Among Diverse High School Students)

Students are aware of the diversity in the classroom, and when it is affirmed, respected, and incorporated, students notice that as well. A participant in the study noted above indicated feeling empowered in the experimental classroom. More students felt opportunities to respect other cultures in this type of class, and were well aware of cultural diversity in a positive way. (Promoting Academic Achievement and Identity Development Among Diverse High School Students) When we teach with diversity in mind, students notice. One student particularly appreciated teachers who saw his diversity as a strength and allowed its incorporation into the classroom rather than its being stifled. (Nieto 7)

Implications for Pedagogical Reform

Educating while incorporating diversity is a necessary component of modern U.S. education. (Smith and assoc. 3 and 29)

It was recognized that not all aspects of diversity were positive; educators are in the important process of learning how to make students aware of the positive aspects of their diversity. (Dhindsa et. al.) It is, however, important that classrooms, in addition to being intellectually and socioeconomically diverse, should also be racially diverse. (Mpfou and Thomas) Integration of students alone is not enough; educators must carefully construct the setting to be positive and cooperative. (Shechtman) This is increasingly difficult to do
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in a numbers-driven educational world, but it is necessary if we are to avoid the alienation of any student. (Brown et al.)

One researcher stressed the importance of teacher education programs that help teachers understand best practices of diversity and multicultural education. (Dhindsa et. al.)

"It has been reported that teacher education programmes often do little to: (a) recognize teachers own beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices; and (b) help teachers recognize that students’ personal and community life affects the classroom teaching (Zeichner and Hoeft 1995). Teacher education programmes should provide a venue for teacher educators to use the cultural differences in highlighting inconsistencies between teachers’ beliefs and their actual and desired practices. The arrangement of teaching practice for science teacher trainees should be optimized by providing them experience in more than one school in different cultural settings. Moreover, it is important that teacher educators also have experience in teaching students from multicultural backgrounds."(Dhindsa)

These integration practices need to be incorporated at an earlier age in order to be more effective, as growing diversity in the classroom presents ever-increasing challenges for teachers. (Shechtman) Educators are the bridge between student differences. (Nieto 18)

If we as educators do not address these challenges, we face more troubles in future classrooms from alienation. (Brown et al.) If we as educators do address these challenges, we may see an increase in academic achievement and student self-efficacy. (Mpofu and Thomas) Holocaust education is a logical link to bridging the gap between the differences Nieto cites. "When modern readers realize that they easily could have been in a situation they read about, the events of the past are not so unbelievable. When they identify with the
protagonists of the books they read, history—the Holocaust—becomes highly personalized." (Jordan) When students begin to experience the Holocaust through the literature and understand the damage prejudice and racism can inflict personally, this learning becomes a way of preventing it from occurring again. There are opportunities for students to learn about the feelings experienced not only by the oppressed, but by those who had power in the society and felt it morally wrong but safer to comply with the wrongdoings of the Nazi party. (Jordan) "These works of literature have the ability to transform a modern child’s consciousness and instill in that child the importance of understanding and tolerance." (Jordan)

Students who participated in an interactive study of the Nuremberg Trial and then a study of the modern Bosnian conflict and actual trials held in The Hague identified feelings that the experience would have a lasting effect and keep them focused on human rights issues. The participants also indicated that they were thankful to have the opportunity to grow through the study. (van Driel)

Not all studies of The Holocaust are successful at producing life-changing experiences, but it seems to depend on what educators have done to prepare young minds to internalize the experience. When British students attended Holocaust information sessions, heard a Holocaust survivor speak, and were then debriefed about related issues such as bullying and prejudice, many seemed to come away with an incomplete understanding. Those students who had received more instruction over time about the Holocaust before the one-day event seemed to internalize the lessons more readily than other who went in "cold". (Short)
In contrast, a well-planned unit of Holocaust education through complex instruction (CI) was seen to reduce the amount of prejudice and racism evident in participants, whether they were the teachers or the students of the curriculum. (Sebra & Gundare)

"The findings were that German adolescents (high school students) knowledge regarding the events leading to the rise of the Nazi party was greater than that of the Israeli adolescents. However, the knowledge of Israelis was greater regarding the Holocaust. A positive correlation was found between the knowledge levels and their attitudes toward the other groups (German/Israeli) and toward resistance to the possible rise of a dictatorial regime. The findings point to the fact that multicultural education, which combines attitudinal, cognitive, and instrumental goals, can succeed in promoting nonracist views." (Shamai et al.)

“A multicultural perspective presumes that classrooms should not simply allow discussions that focus on social justice, but in fact welcome them. These discussions might center on concerns that affect culturally diverse communities – poverty, discrimination, war, the national budget – and what students can do to change them. Because all of these concerns are pluralistic, education must of necessity be multicultural.” (Nieto, 2002, 41) It would seem that -in any school- students’ needs are as numerous and varied as the students themselves. In this era of increasing diversity, all students must be guaranteed a voice in the classroom for the sake of all students’ intellectual and emotional well-being.
Methodology

Rationale for Mixed Methods Design

Eliciting formative feedback in the form of short-answer observations and personal reflections from students allows them to articulate in their own words what they see and feel about themselves and other students in the classroom. The researcher can sift through these responses and identify trends and themes in response. In quantifying the number of responses, the nature of the response, and which student wrote it, this may show trends in behaviors along factors such as gender, ethnicity, SES, for example. From the answers on the sociometric survey at the beginning of the unit, student observations after reading multicultural literature and other student work, it may be possible to see correlations between the students’ multicultural and diversity learning experiences and the self-integrating behaviors that the researcher may observe.

Site Selection

This study took place in a suburban eighth grade classroom, comprised of approximately thirty students at any given time. There is not much room for students to sit far away from any other student. Students sit in rows for direct instruction, and structures are in place for students to use tables and rearrange desks for partner or small group work.

Researcher’s Role

In a middle school classroom, peer groups form early and cement very solidly. It is common to observe the same two or four students grouping together for an entire year when given free choice of peer partner. The main role of the researcher in this study is to plan instruction based on holocaust literature and provide students with experiences that
broaden their understanding of the cultural and social diversity in the classroom, the school, and their own lives.

**Ethical Considerations**

Extreme care must be taken to keep the classroom discussions and assessments friendly and non-confrontational, since the content touches on issues of race, religion, physicality, etc. Allowances must be made for non-participation in activities if students feel uncomfortable, especially during the interpersonal phases of this study. Confidentiality of student self-assessments and classroom diversity assessments must be maintained by securing papers. (Creswell 2003)

**Procedures**

Students participated in the construction, display, and analysis of "I Am" poems and at the onset of the unit of study. Students subsequently read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and listened to Holocaust survivor stories on the University of Southern California "Survivors of the Shoah" website. After a final activity of viewing two videos in the classroom based on Anne' Frank's biography and Holocaust survivor stories, students then created projects using informative and narrative writing modes to identify what they learned about The Holocaust.

**Data Collection Methods**

Initially, the teacher administered a sociometric survey to define the initial parameters of student free-choice partnering, as many of them had history at the school as seventh graders. Approximately one month later, at the start of another unit, when assigned a pre-reading activity, students were asked to write free-choice group members' names in the
upper right corner of the prereading activity paper. Finally, four months later, students were given a second sociometric survey to determine instances of self-integration and whether or not the study of The Holocaust had an impact on the students' perception of their own willingness to self-integrate.

Data Analysis Procedures

Based on the initial sociometric survey, the researcher determined the students' first choices for partners (A), other students who were not first choice but would be comfortable teammates (B), and other students with whom the student would prefer not to be grouped based on past experience (C). The pre-reading activity sheet for a unit subsequent to the study of The Holocaust established the groups of students given free choice of group members in which the researcher would actually be able to witness instances of student self-integration (D). Upon completion of the pre-reading activity, names of students from the original sociometric survey were listed on an X and Y-axis chart. An "A" was placed at the intersection of each first choice pair of students. A "B" was placed at the intersection of each comfortable pair or students. A "C" was placed at the intersection of each avoidant pair of students. Finally, based on the names listed at the top of each pre-reading activity for the unit subsequent to The Holocaust study, a "D" was placed at the intersection of each pair of student names not containing an "A" or "B". Upon completion of the second sociometric survey, instances of self-integration based on gender, culture, interests, and reading level were tallied, as well as 'yes' or 'no' responses to questions about the study of The Holocaust having an effect on the students' own perception of their willingness to work with others who are different from them in some way.
Results and Discussion

When asked to work together on a pre-reading activity, twelve of twenty-five students, or forty-eight percent, were found working in groups containing students not named in categories "A" or "B" (primary or secondary choice or group members) on the initial sociometric survey. Additionally, two students were found working in a group containing at least one member listed as a "C" (to be avoided) on the initial sociometric survey.

Results from the second sociometric survey showed that there were nineteen instances of student self-integrating behavior. Of these self-integrations, five were based on gender, eight on cultural difference, eleven on interests, and six on reading level. Four students indicated that the study of The Holocaust changed their mind about another student in class. Six students indicated that the study of The Holocaust changed their mind in general about working with people they considered different from themselves.

Conclusions

One of the riskiest behaviors in which a middle school student can engage is being different from the social norm or acting differently from established patterns. In this study, the students' actions seem to speak more loudly than their written words. The fact that twelve students, or forty-eight percent of the class, chose to work in a group without first- or second-choice group members supports the other important statistic of nineteen students, or seventy-six percent of the class working with a student who is different based on gender, culture, interests, or reading level. However, when asked to identify their own self-perception of how self-integrating an individual they are, remarkably few students, only sixteen to twenty-four percent of students indicated that their mind had changed about working with people who were different from them. Based on the comparisons of the
sociometric surveys and free-choice pre-reading activity, students' self-integrating behaviors increased in this classroom after the study of The Holocaust, while the students' own perceptions about self-integrating behaviors did not increase commensurate with the observable instances of student self-integration.

**Delimitations**

Initially, this study will confine itself to student self-integrating behaviors that happen in the observer's classroom after the self-assessment, study of classroom diversity, and unit of multicultural literature study.

**Limitations**

One factor that may influence the outcomes of this study is student self-perception and varying students' perception of what diversity means. Another factor that may influence the subjects of this study is outside influence; students may live in a household which values and practices multicultural principles, and other students may live in a household where biases and stereotypes predominate. Varying levels of familiarity with diversity education and personal maturity are also possible limitations on this study; students likely have had some training in previous classrooms.

**Implications for Further Research**

Research in the academic community at large shows that teachers who make an effort to encourage student relationships that value, respect, and include all members of the classroom community decrease the chances that any student will fall victim to the feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement so destructive to students' continuing academic success.
Unanswered questions remain about this group of students' social decision-making processes in the classroom. Why did two students choose to work in a group with a student where there had clearly been conflict in the past with that student to the point that they would single out that individual as someone to be avoided? Are students consciously aware of the decisions they make about other students? To what extent are students blind or sensitive to the differences between them and other students in a classroom community?

The addition of a control group situation may help in terms of contrasting both quantitative and qualitative data. Postponing the study of The Holocaust until later in another school year, performing sociometric surveys before and after another unit of study earlier in the year, and then conducting the same study performed in this paper later in that same school year could achieve this kind of control group situation. Data could then be compared between units of study, rather than within a single unit of study.
References


