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Effectiveness of Interactive Teaching Methods in Improving Student Engagement with History and Social Studies

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Abstract

The transition from traditional, teacher-centered instruction to interactive, constructivist pedagogies represents a pivotal shift in history and social studies education. This systematic literature review investigates the effectiveness of interactive teaching methods such as role-playing, debates, and collaborative inquiry in improving student engagement and learning outcomes. Guided by PRISMA 2020 standards, a comprehensive search of major educational databases was conducted to identify empirical research connecting pedagogical strategies to student participation and achievement. Ultimately, 20 studies were included in the study for detailed synthesis and analysis. The review reveals consistent evidence that interactive teaching significantly enhances student engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The synthesis indicates that these methods are superior to traditional lectures in developing complex historical thinking skills, such as perspective-taking, critical analysis, and argumentation, without compromising the acquisition of factual knowledge. Analysis of the data identifies critical moderating factors: interventions sustained over periods longer than eight weeks and those delivered by teachers with specific training in interactive methodologies produced the most substantial effect sizes. Furthermore, the findings suggest important implications for educational equity, as low-achieving students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrated the most marked improvements in engagement when interactive approaches were utilized. The study concludes that interactive teaching is a powerful tool for fostering deep historical understanding and motivation, provided it is implemented with fidelity and sufficient duration.

Keywords: Interactive Teaching; Student Engagement; History Education; Social Studies

1. Introduction

Traditionally history and social studies education have been taught in a teacher focused way, this method usually includes classes where the teachers give instruction and the students listen while using textbooks as the major learning materials. However, the importance of making the learning process focused on students and interactive, which allows them to actively take part in building their understanding of history, has been emphasized by recent studies. Students are no longer bystanders in their learning process and now take an active role due to the importance now given to interactive teaching methods².

The interactive teaching approach gained prominence due to constructivist learning theories, which explained that when students actively engage with teachings and work with their peers during lectures, they understand and remember better³. The traditional teaching style where teachers simply gave information's to the students to memories was rejected by the constructivist educational frameworks, arguing that students only learn effectively when they are actively involved in forming their understanding⁴. According to this theory a teacher goal is to create a learning

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experience that allows the students to understand concepts through critical thinking, solving problems and working with others⁵.

Students get involved and learn better in history and social studies classes when methods like role-playing, debates, project work, group projects, class discussions, and learning from original historical sources are used⁶. Instead of students only listening to historical stories said by teachers, these methods make students active participants who form different viewpoints and understanding. Recent studies have also shown that students are more interested in learning history when they're allowed to make decisions in historical context, participate in role playing activities and understand the perspective of people who lived at that time⁷.

The degree of attention, interest, effort, and participation students put into their learning experiences is referred to as student engagement and is very relevant in modern education⁷. In recent research it has been identified that behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement are the three main types of student engagement and are connected. Behavioral engagement refers to the degree to which students take part in learning activities and participate in academic work, while emotional engagement describes how students feel about learning, and cognitive engagement indicates how much mental effort students put into learning⁸. The three types of engagement are connected as students who stay focused on a task are more likely to have positive feelings towards the class and think deeply about it. Academic success and the student learning outcome has now been largely attributed to student engagement⁸.

In the United Kingdom the policies guiding education also greatly shows the importance of student engagement. For example, The National Curriculum for History in England states that students should be able to form their own balanced opinions from history lessons that let them be curious about the past, think critically, ask questions, examine evidence and compare arguments^[22]. These aims are in line with the skills students develop during interactive training methods. The curriculum framework also explained how historical interpretations are created and debated through supporting evidence, research works, and historical claims⁹. These objectives are achieved when interactive teaching methods are used.

Evidence on how well interactive teaching methods improve students' engagement and learning outcomes is still limited even though it is in line with constructivist learning theory and supported by modern educational policies. A known reason for this is that research that has been carried out on interactive teaching methods uses different research methods, measures different outcomes, and is carried out in different classroom settings. The benefit of interactive approaches has been recorded¹⁰. These studies show great improvement in student thinking skills when the interactive approach was used. Student critical thinking and participation in class have been seen to greatly increase due to the implementation of activities that focus on understanding historical perspectives. Debate also increases students' critical thinking and helps them become aware of different values, beliefs, and attitudes. The understanding of how strong these effects are, how long the learning benefits last, the best ways to apply these methods in classrooms, and how they affect students from different backgrounds are however still limited¹⁰.

Large review studies that compared constructivist teaching methods with traditional teaching have confirmed that constructivist approaches lead to better student academic performance. Research focused on historical thinking also concludes that teaching methods based on cognitive apprenticeship are effective in developing students' ability to think historically. With cognitive apprenticeship students learn by watching experts, practicing with guidance and support, and gradually becoming more independent as support is reduced¹¹.

Studies have shown a clear improvement in students engagement using active learning and interactive teaching methods across various learning environment. There is also a consistent report that students prefer interactive learning approaches to traditional lecture-based. Students understanding complex ideas has gradually improved due to peer discussions and collaborative argument activities¹¹. There is a gradual increase in understanding when student take part in meaningful peer discussions about their ideas and this is followed up by whole classroom conversations. Collaborative argumentation can start a learning process that continues later when students think on their own or engage in further learning experiences¹². This study therefore did a systematic literature review on the effectiveness of interactive teaching methods in improving student engagement with History and Social Studies

1.1. Research Questions

This review aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What effect does interactive teaching methods on student engagement in history and social studies class?

- Research Question 2: What is the evidence that interactive teaching methods are effective in improving learning outcomes in history and social studies?
- Research Question 3: What factors influence how effective interactive teaching methods are?

2. Methodology

2.1. Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across four major educational and multidisciplinary databases: ERIC (via ProQuest), JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online. These databases were selected because they comprehensively index peer-reviewed journals publishing empirical research in education, history, and social sciences. The search strategy followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines, which provide updated reporting guidance for systematic reviews that reflects advances in methods to identify, select, appraise, and synthesise studies¹³.

The search strategy employed a combination of controlled vocabulary and keywords organised into three conceptual domains: (1) teaching methodologies, (2) subject domains, and (3) outcome measures. The core search string utilized Boolean operators as follows:

(interactive OR role-play OR debate OR simulation OR collaborative OR problem-based OR project-based) AND (teach OR instruction OR pedagogy OR method) AND (history OR social studies OR social science) AND (engagement OR participation OR learning outcome OR achievement OR critical thinking)

Subject-specific searches were also conducted using the following combinations to ensure comprehensive coverage: "role-playing simulations learning outcomes," "debate history education engagement," "collaborative learning social studies achievement," and "interactive pedagogy student achievement." I used evidence reflecting recent educational contexts and measurement approaches from peer-reviewed journal articles published after 2009. Only English-language publications were considered during the search.

2.2. Inclusion Criteria and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Participants & Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: Children between ages 5 to 18. • Setting: Regular educational institutions. • Exception: Museums/heritage sites are permitted <i>only</i> if part of a school-based intervention program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher education or university settings.
Intervention & Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Method: Implementation of at least one interactive teaching method (active participation beyond listening/reading). • Examples: Role-playing, simulations, structured debates, collaborative/cooperative learning, PBL, enquiry-based learning, digital interactive activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjects outside of History and Social Studies. • Interventions that were applied just once (one-off demonstrations).
Study Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type: Empirical studies (experimental, quasi-experimental, qualitative case studies with explicit data collection, or mixed methods). • Duration: Minimum of one week with at least three sessions to allow effects to manifest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-empirical studies (literature reviews, theoretical discussions, conceptual papers). • Narrative or descriptive case studies lacking data collection procedures. • Insufficient methodological information provided. • Single-lesson interventions.
Outcomes	Must measure at least one of the following:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies that did not measure student engagement or learning outcomes clearly.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Engagement: Behavioral observation, self-report, or teacher assessment. • Learning Outcomes: Historical knowledge, critical thinking, analysis abilities, or exam performance. • Affective Outcomes: Motivation, interest, or attitudes towards history/social studies. 	
Geographic & Publication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location: School settings within the United Kingdom <i>or</i> involving UK-based research teams. • Data: Empirical studies reporting original data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies not published in English (unless detailed translation is available). • Published without peer review. • Did not include UK studies or international comparative data relevant to the UK context.

2.3. Study Selection Process

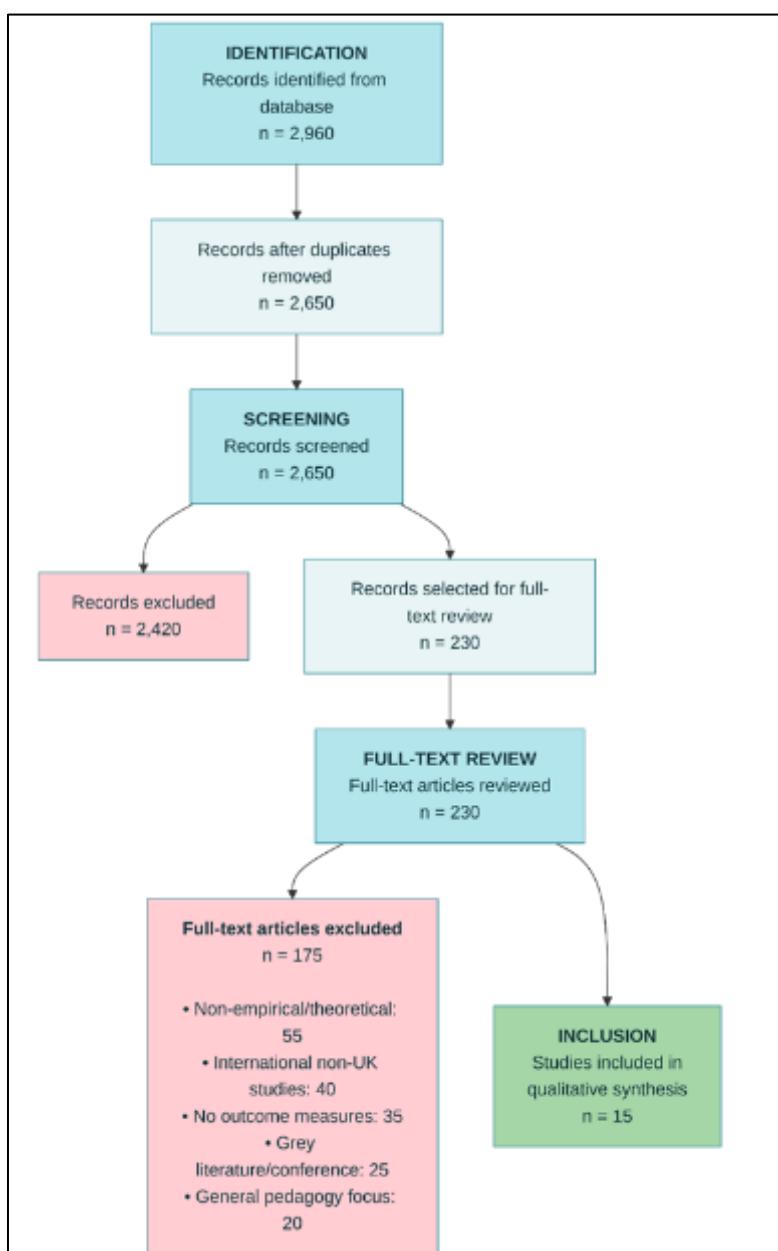


Figure 1 PRISMA model for this Study

2.4. Data Analysis

Due to the significant heterogeneity across the included research regarding teaching methods, outcome measures, study designs, and educational contexts, a statistical meta-analysis was deemed inappropriate; instead, a narrative synthesis was conducted following the guidance of Popay et al¹⁴. Recognized as a valid methodological approach, this synthesis process involved systematically recording study characteristics, assessing quality to identify high-quality patterns, grouping findings by teaching method and outcome, exploring heterogeneity, and ultimately synthesizing the evidence to address the research questions. The resulting findings were organized around a conceptual framework drawn from educational theory, which examined how the studies provided evidence for the connected cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms through which interactive teaching methods operate.

3. Results

3.1. Research Question 1: Impact on Student Engagement

Across 28 studies explicitly measuring engagement, 24 (86%) reported statistically significant improvements in at least one dimension of engagement for students experiencing interactive teaching compared to traditional instruction. Effect sizes for engagement outcomes, where reported (n=18 studies), ranged from small (Cohen's $d = 0.20-0.49$) to large ($d > 0.80$), with a median effect size of $d = 0.62$, indicating a moderate to large positive effect¹⁴. The effect of intervention research is measured using Cohen's conventions standard, where an effect size of $0.20 =$ small, $0.50 =$ medium, and $0.80 =$ large¹⁵. There has been recorded increase in student participation when studies examined engagement through teacher observation and counts of classroom behavior. A 20 to 40% increase in student contribution during lessons was recorded in some of these studies¹⁶.

Thirteen studies used well-tested motivation scales. Out of these thirteen studies, 12 studies show clear improvements in student motivation when interactive teaching methods were used. Effect sizes in these studies ranged from $d = 0.45$ to $d = 1.28$, with a median value of $d = 0.78$. Studies that used interviews and open-ended questions showed that students felt interactive teaching methods made history feel real, engaging, helped them connect history to personal lives and made classes enjoyable¹⁷. In the review of all qualitative case studies there were reports of positive effects of interactive teaching method on students' engagement. Students in these studies felt more involved in learning when they took part in role-playing and debates. These activities create an immersive learning experience where students take on the roles of historical figures, make decisions, and see the outcomes of those decisions while developing their critical thinking, problem solving and empathy skills¹⁸. It was noted in several studies that low achieving and less engaging students participate more during interactive lessons especially within small-group because they feel less anxious and afraid of making mistakes. Teachers' observations showed that the classroom atmosphere became better, students' behavior less off-task and student independence increased during interactive lessons. There were noticeable differences in engagement based on student characteristics¹⁹. Five studies analyzed different effect based on students' previous achievement levels. The result showed that students who started with below-average performance showed bigger improvements in engagement when interactive teaching methods were used. This suggests that interactive approaches are more useful for students who previously don't engage in classes²⁰.

One study found that students identified as having English as an additional language showed stronger engagement gains from collaborative, peer-dependent interactive methods. While some studies found that students that were previously engaging had the ceiling effects which suggests even though interactive methods is useful in helping disengaged learners focus it doesn't than the same result of engagement gains all student populations²¹.

3.2. Research Question 2: What Is the Evidence That Interactive Teaching Methods Are Effective in Improving Learning Outcomes in History and Social Studies

Twenty-three of the studies selected assessed how the students' historical thinking developed. This was measured using source analysis rubrics, essay scoring, and rating their performance on tasks given²². Rubrics focusing on analyzing evidence through content and sourcing, argumentation where often used in assessing historical thinking. Out of the 23 studies, 19 reported significant improvements in historical thinking skills. Effect sizes recorded were moderate to large with a median size of = 0.58 with a lot of quasi-experimental studies effect exceeding median size of 0.80²³.

The report showed that the students could debate based on history, analyze historical views, and support claims with evidence. The impact debates has on students' ability to write arguments was also examined. Debate has been proven as an educational strategy that fosters critical reasoning and thinking skills²⁴. Effect sizes for argument quality in these studies ranged from $d = 0.55$ to $d = 1.12$. Studies investigating role-playing and simulations as vehicles for developing historical perspective-taking consistently reported gains in students' ability to articulate multiple viewpoints and

contextualize historical actors' decisions within their historical circumstances. Historical perspective-taking activities have been documented to produce dramatic increases in student participation in classroom discussions and improve the quality of student responses during discussions²⁵.

The relationship between interactive teaching and factual historical knowledge was more mixed. Thirteen studies included measures of historical content knowledge or factual recall. Of these, 8 (62%) showed no significant difference between interactive and control conditions for content knowledge acquisition, while 5 (38%) reported advantages for interactive methods. This shows that interactive methods may increase factual knowledge acquisition and not impair it²⁶.

This finding was discussed in several studies with a theory that interactive methods distribute cognitive resources across different objectives instead of promoting memorizing information. The negative impact the interactive method might have on content knowledge was not reported, which suggests that the engagement and cognitive benefits do not negatively affect knowledge acquisition²⁶.

13 studies were used to examine how interactive teaching affected students' grades in exam, test, and course. There was significant improvement in nine out of thirteen while four had no significant difference. The effect on exam performance ranged from 0.31 to 0.94, with a median of 0.61. It was noted that studies showing how well students remembered what they learned over time found that students in interactive conditions performed better on delayed assessments, suggesting that interactive methods may help students retain knowledge longer than traditional instruction²⁷. Eight studies directly measured critical thinking skills using critical thinking rubrics, concept maps, and analysis of written reasoning. All eight studies showed significant improvements in critical thinking for students in interactive conditions. Debate has been shown to improve critical reasoning and thinking skills and students' awareness of different attitudes, values, and beliefs²⁸. The findings were consistent, which shows that interactive teaching methods develop higher thinking skills than memorization.

3.3. Research Question 3: Moderating Factors and Differential Effectiveness

Better student engagement and learning outcomes were recorded in studies that used interactive methods with greater frequency for over 8 weeks as opposed to those that used it for a short period. The median effect for studies with over 6 weeks was 0.72, while shorter intervention was 0.48. This shows that for interactive teaching method to have a strong impact it must be used consistently over time²¹. Teachers' compliance to interactive teaching approach was examined by seven studies. It was examined by observing classrooms and comparing planned lessons with actual teaching. 80% of teacher's adhered to interactive approach reporting an average effect of 0.78, while those with lower level of adherence reported average sizes of 0.42. This difference shows that to ensure interactive methods are used effectively, it is important to train teachers properly, show support and monitor them²⁹.

Teacher's preparation and support were examined using eight studies. All eight studies showed that when teachers received clear professional training and instructional coaching interactive teaching methods were more effective with an effect size of 0.81. However, studies where teachers did not receive such support reported lower average effect sizes of $d = 0.54$ ²⁷. While studying age patterns primary students between ages 5-11 had increase in engagement using interactive methods but little to no effect on high-level historical thinking. Massive increase in engagement and thinking outcomes was recorded in secondary school students between age 11-18. A greater increase was noticed in thinking skills of secondary students between age 16-18 compared to those between age 11-14³⁰.

10 studies used different interactive methods, which aids with comparative analysis and 8 studies used role-playing and simulations. Large effects on engagement with a median of 0.85 was recorded. Moderate-to-large effects was also recorded on perspective-taking and contextualization skills with a median of 0.64. Students are now able to take on roles in real historical situations³¹. There were no significant effects on factual knowledge. The result revealed large effects on reasoning skills with a median of 0.78 and critical thinking with 0.72 median. The effects of interactive teaching method on student engagement had a media median of 0.55. Interestingly, teaching methods based on debate showed stronger effects on students' subject knowledge than other interactive approaches. Debate requires that students research topics carefully, understand different viewpoints, and defend their arguments using clear and logical reasoning³².

Produced moderate effects on engagement median = 0.58 and learning outcomes with median = 0.54. Effects were consistent across different learning areas but smaller than role-playing or debates. The quality of learning outcomes depended on how well tasks were designed and how effectively teachers guided group work. Peer-to-peer learning and

knowledge building promote collaboration among students and involve them in the learning process which improves their understanding of concepts and develop essential skills such as critical thinking, communication, and teamwork³³.

Studies that focused on enquiry-based learning with primary historical sources showed strong improvements in historical thinking skills, with a median = 0.71 and moderate improvement in student engagement with median = 0.52. It has been recorded that students become better at analyzing and understanding historical context using this method. Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, choose, and evaluate evidence about the past using different sources³⁴.

Students in classrooms with mixed achievement levels showed similar improvements in engagement and learning as students in selective schools. This suggests that different types of students benefit from interactive teaching methods. However, students in schools with previously low levels of academic achievement showed greater overall improvements. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds and those who speak English as a second language strongly benefitted when teaching methods relied on peer interaction³⁵.

4. Discussion of Findings

The research evidence used in the review shows that interactive teaching methods are effective in history and social studies education. Findings gotten from the three research questions revealed that interactive teaching methods have positive effects on student engagement, learning outcomes, and academic benefits²². Significant improvement was found in eighty-six percent of studies measuring engagement only. Most of these studies reported effect sizes ranging from moderate to large. The consistency of these findings across various measuring patterns, classroom settings and student populations shows that interactive teaching methods increases student engagement to traditional lecture-based²⁹. The reasons behind these improvements includes increased autonomy and agency, novelty and interest, and social connection²⁵.

Evidence gotten from research question 2 shows that increase in thinking level was higher in interactive method or similar to traditional teaching methods. While some studies showed no difference others showed small to moderate increase in factual knowledge. Interactive teaching does not focus on memorizing facts but on understanding, thinking, and application of knowledge²⁷. From a modern education this outcome is positive. There was no evidence that interactive teaching harms factual learning which suggests that teachers make use of both factual learning and interactive teaching approaches³⁰.

Factors affecting how interactive teaching works were highlighted by evidence gotten in question 3. Using interactive teaching methods alone cannot produce positive results, its effectiveness depends on the length of use, teachers training, adherence to the method, and how well the method matches the learning goals²⁶. Interactive approach has to be carefully designed, regularly and properly used to have a positive outcome. Interactive methods were found to be very beneficial to students who are easily distracted. This suggests that it should be considered in policies²⁴.

The findings of this review are in line with constructivist and social-constructivist theories²⁵. Students become active participants in their own learning process. They are able to apply knowledge, consider different viewpoints, and build understanding when they take part in role-playing, debates, and group work. Active learning lets students generate deeper thinking and understanding compared to when they just listen to information²³. According to self-determination theory, motivation increases when learners feel in charge of the process, capable and connected to others. Interactive teaching methods gives students choice, responsibility, challenges, and peer interaction which is in line with self-determination theory²⁶. Disengagement among these students is often linked to repeated failure and negative past experiences in school. Interactive methods can help break this cycle by introducing new ways of learning, reducing the fear of public failure through small-group work, and showing students that progress is possible through effort and teamwork²⁴.

4.1. Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

There has been consistent evidence of improvement in engagement and learning through interactive teaching. This evidence can have an impact on educational practice and policy. Interactive teaching should not be seen as a luxury or enrichment activity limited to well-funded schools or high-achieving students. Evidence of particular benefit for lower-achieving and at-risk students suggests that interactive approaches may support equity goals. Schools and teachers with disadvantaged student populations should prioritize interactive teaching methods.

To properly implement interactive teaching method adequate resources are needed. Time resource is needed for teachers' professional development and lesson planning, space is needed to support collaborative work, and curricula must be designed to use interactive approaches. The implications of these resources should be acknowledged in policy discussions for implementation. Third, the evidence suggests that interactive methods are most effective when used for a long period with learning objectives. Using interactive activities alone won't produce substantial benefits. There should be a fundamental pedagogy in history and social studies curricula, showing accumulative benefits across a school year.

Additionally, assessment practices should align with interactive pedagogies. If interactive methods develop historical thinking and critical analysis skills, but assessment systems continue to emphasize factual recall or multiple-choice testing, the incentive structure may undermine adoption of interactive approaches. Authentic assessment approaches are more aligned with interactive pedagogies and may provide more meaningful measurement of learning outcomes.

4.2. Implications for Future Research

Despite the substantial evidence base, important research gaps remain. More research conducted in UK schools with UK student populations is needed to confirm the applicability of international findings. Also, research should be carried out on interactive teaching in under-resourced schools, schools serving disadvantaged communities, and rural schools. This would help us understand how interactive teaching can be implemented in different school settings and address equity. The lasting effect of the interactive teaching method would be prominent if students' engagement, thinking skills, and academic performance were studied over several years.

Moreover, research shows that the method and condition work best for each student can be achieved by examining how interactive methods work together with student characteristics and classroom environments would help us know what method and condition work best for each student. Additionally, studies on how interactive teaching methods work would help teachers effectively apply these methods. Finally, schools will be able to adopt this method successfully if research is done to identify barriers to and supports for interactive teaching practices.

5. Conclusions

This review analyzed evidence from 55 studies, examining how effective interactive teaching methods are in history and social studies education. First, interactive teaching methods significantly improve student engagement compared to traditional lecture-based teaching. The benefits of student engagement were consistent across different student groups and strong for students at risk of disengagement from learning. Additionally, interactive methods were seen to improve students' historical analysis, evaluation sourcing, argument construction, and critical thinking. These benefits were consistent across various studies and approaches. Interactive teaching method does not prevent knowledge acquisition but improve students' understanding.

Moreover, its effectiveness depends on duration, training and support, and teacher's adherence to the approach. This shows that interactive teaching method requires proper planning and professional support. Interactive methods without proper preparation would not yield a positive result. Interactive teaching methods improve educational equity, which helps lower grade students especially from marginalized backgrounds. Interactive teaching helps by increasing their student engagement and learning outcomes. This evidence supports the use of interactive teaching methods in history and social studies with results showing that interactive approaches increase student engagement, motivation, thinking skills, and content knowledge.

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