Chapter 8

"Bossed around by the queen"

Elementary students' understanding of individuals and institutions in history

Keith C. Barton

Over the past decade, many scholars have called for an increase in the amount of history taught in elementary school, and the recent national standards in history recommend that extensive historical content be taught throughout the elementary grades.[1] To teach any subject, educators must start with an understanding of how children make sense of the topic; but although impressive achievements have been made in examining the content of students' ideas in fields such as mathematics and science, research on their knowledge and understanding of history is still in its early stages—particularly at the elementary level. Some patterns, however, recently have begun to emerge from this work. It has become clear, for example, that even young children know about and are interested in history;[2] and although some studies emphasize the disorganized nature of students' historical thinking,[3] other work points to more consistently structured aspects of their thought.[4]

The yearlong, qualitative investigation reported here of 4th and 5th graders in two elementary classrooms extends and refines one of the emerging conclusions in the analysis of elementary children's historical thinking—their tendency to see historical events in terms of the personal intentions and interactions of individuals and to ignore the role of societal institutions such as government and the economy. These findings are consistent not only with other studies of children's historical understanding but also with research on political socialization and on children's understanding of economics.

Students' focus on individuals can lead to significant omissions or misconceptions in their understanding of history, and instruction in the elementary grades should be carefully designed to help students develop the understandings necessary to study the topic meaningfully. These findings suggest that students' study of history may best be accomplished within the context of an integrated social studies curriculum.

Design of the study

Purpose

This study investigated the content and structure of elementary students' historical thinking and identified how their thinking influenced participation in instructional activities. One purpose of the study was to identify any ideas about history that students held prior to instruction—a goal similar to work on "misconceptions" or "alternative conceptions" in science education.[5] But whereas other recent studies have investigated students' prior ideas in history,[6] the project reported here went beyond such research in two principal ways. First, this project investigated not only students' ideas about established topics in the upper elementary curriculum (such as European explorers and the American Revolution), but also their understanding of less commonly taught issues (such as the history of race and gender relations and of technological change). Second, the study attempted not only to establish a baseline of prior understanding but also to examine how that understanding influenced students' participation in instructional activities—how students interpreted the historical content they encountered at school in light of their previous ideas.

This study was not an evaluation of the instructional effectiveness of the teachers in these two classrooms, and no attempt was made to investigate systematically their instructional goals or to measure students' achievement of them. Given the lack of empirical research on elementary instruction in history (particularly at the outset of this study), such an attempt would have been premature.[7] The focus was therefore cognitive rather than pedagogical; the study sought to establish what aspects of students' thinking must be taken into account in planning instruction, rather than to evaluate whether these teachers had already formulated effective means for doing so. Such research has substantial implications for teaching, for only by identifying students' prior ideas can effective curricular and instructional choices be made. The following report will indicate some of the problems that students' conceptions created.

This study also did not seek to determine whether elementary students can or cannot learn history, or to establish the "level" of their thought. While some older studies concluded that history—defined in terms of Piagetian stages—was beyond the capability of young children,[8] more recent work emphasizes the range and complexity of historical thinking and points to the multiple components of such thought (e.g., the use of evidence, the ability to take the perspective of people in the past, the recognition of agency, and the construction of a purpose for knowing history), as well as to the socially situated nature of each of these components.[9] Attempting simplistically to establish whether children can or cannot understand history distorts the field beyond recognition; children clearly do understand history—the important issues are what they understand and how they understand it. The present study is but one part of a broader research project that has identified both impressive strengths that formal instruction can build on and refine[10] and formidable obstacles that will require careful attention from teachers and curriculum planners.[11] Although the present study focuses on one of these obstacles, it should by no means be taken as a general indictment of children's ability to learn history.

Setting, population, and methods

This research was conducted in the classrooms of Amy Leigh and Tina Reynolds, two teachers recommended for their innovative and activity-oriented instruction. (With their consent, I have used the teachers' real names. All students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy and that of their families.) Their school is near Cincinnati, in a long-established suburban community consisting primarily of stable residential neighborhoods. The students reflected the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the community: All were of European American descent, and most came from middle-class or upper-middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds; a large portion had parents with college degrees and jobs in professional or managerial fields. On the other hand, slightly more than 10 percent of the students lived in the community's small public housing projects, and thus the range of socioeconomic backgrounds in the classes was wide. The overall academic achievement of students in the school was high, and the school scored among the top 10 in the state in each of the first three years of the state's new testing program (the year of this study and the two preceding years). Both teachers described their classrooms as including students with a range of academic abilities, but they considered most to be average or above average academically.

These classrooms provided extensive opportunities for insight into students' historical thinking. Both teachers considered themselves interested in history, and both devoted a great deal of time to the topic. Neither used textbooks but instead conveyed content through trade books, primary sources, and their own explanations, combined with student-centered projects, role plays and simulations, and open-ended writing assignments (often written from the perspective of people alive at the time). Their teaching accorded well with general principles of effective subject-matter instruction; rather than attempting to cover a large amount of miscellaneous information and expecting students to remember isolated facts, for example, they took time to plan sustained instruction in a few topics that they considered important. In addition, both teachers consistently engaged in interactive scaffolding of students' learning. Rarely, for example, did they tell students exactly what to do or how to do it; rather, they used questions to help students develop and improve their own assignments. Both also encouraged class and small-group discussion and expected students to respond thoughtfully to their questions and to each other.[12]

Students engaged in a variety of instructional activities related to several historical topics. At the beginning of the year they collected information on their personal histories and developed timelines and presentations about their lives. They also spent several weeks working in groups to investigate changes in

aspects of everyday life (sports, work, household technology, cars, etc.) through the use of books, artifacts, and interviews. Students also studied topics such as the Salem witch trials, relations between European settlers and Native Americans, daily life in the colonial era, the American Revolution, and immigration into the United States near the beginning of this century.[13]

In order to investigate students' historical thinking, I used three principal techniques—interviews with students (both formal, semistructured interviews and informal discussions), classroom observation and participation (including frequent discussions with their teachers regarding what students knew and were able to do), and analysis of students' written assignments. During the formal interviews, I showed students a series of pictures from American history, asked them to put them in order and to talk about the reasons for their placement, and then asked a series of questions about their understanding of history and about what they had done in class during the year.[14]

I observed extensively in each classroom. Doing so allowed me to ask much more specific, probing questions during interviews and provided insight into how students' responses related to what they had heard or read in class. The chief advantage of participant observation was that it allowed me to observe students in a much wider range of contexts than interviews alone could have done. Rather than seeing only their responses to my artificial stimuli in interviews, I was able to watch and talk with students as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities. Because students engaged in so many group projects, and because their teachers actively encouraged open-ended, thoughtful discussion of topics, my presence in the classroom provided me with innumerable opportunities to record informal and spontaneous comments by students.

While educational researchers often take the role of nonparticipant observers who attempt to position themselves unobtrusively and not to interfere in instruction, I explicitly took a much more active role. In addition to working with the teachers to plan lessons and locate resources, I frequently taught or cotaught lessons, and even more frequently interjected comments, questions, and observations during class—a practice that the teachers actively encouraged and that fit well with the discussion-oriented nature of their instruction and with the generally open feeling of their classes. When students were engaged in individual or group work I often took on the same role as their teachers—probing students' understanding, asking them questions about the way they carried out the assignment, and providing them with the help they needed.[15]

In addition to analyzing field notes and interview transcripts, I read a total of 278 written compositions that students produced as part of their regular classroom instruction. Both teachers gave frequent written assignments in history. Since these assignments were designed to prepare students for the state's assessment program—which included writing portfolios and open-ended questions in history—they were not of the traditional "fill in the blank" or "answer the questions at the end of the chapter" variety. Instead, assignments usually asked students to draw conclusions supported by evidence (for example, "How has the United States changed over the last 200 years?") or to put themselves in the place of people in history (for example, by writing a letter to a magistrate in Salem protesting a family member's innocence of witchcraft).

Analysis

I drew conclusions from this data through a process of analytic induction. After completing the classroom observations, I scanned field notes, interview transcripts, and student compositions in order to identify an initial set of broad coding categories; these categories were based on the aspects of historical thinking identified by Seixas,[16] on the preliminary impressions I developed during field work, and on emerging patterns in the data. The data were then subjected to a more systematic content analysis, in which I grouped units of data according to these initial categories, many of which were broken down, combined, or added to during the course of coding. The coded data were analyzed using means sometimes referred to as cross-case analysis and constant comparison; I grouped the data from different students responding to the same questions or tasks, identified patterns or regularities, and then looked for evidence of these patterns (including a systematic search for negative or discrepant evidence) across different situations, tasks, and interviews. This resulted in a set of descriptive generalizations about students' thinking, which were then combined into broader analytic domains; I used these patterns to develop the materials and probing questions used in the final set of interviews with students, and I asked the teachers (and in some cases, students) for their feedback on my observations. (The resulting data were coded and analyzed in the same way described above.)

The use of several different methods of data collection, as well as my lengthy and intensive involvement in the classrooms, significantly strengthens the validity of the study's findings. The variety of ways I collected data, for example, reduces the chance of sampling error; I interviewed and observed students during different times of the day and throughout the school year, included all students in observations and informal interviews (and nearly all in formal interviews), and recorded their responses to a wide variety of classroom activities and interview questions. In addition, my active role in the class (combined with the collaborative atmosphere the teachers created) helped establish a significant degree of trust and rapport with students; as a result, their comments during interviews and class activities consistently appeared to be genuine and sincere responses to an interested adult—rather than self-conscious or artificial reactions to an unknown researcher. Finally, the frequency of my involvement with the students and their teachers helped ensure that I was observing representative school behavior rather than exceptional patterns due solely to my presence.

Results

Throughout the year, students showed little understanding of the role in history of social institutions such as government or the economy. Rather, they conceptualized historical topics in terms of the intentions and interactions of individuals. When discussing the history of race and gender relations, for example, students pointed to the role of famous people in changing individual attitudes. Similarly, in explaining changes in fashion and technology, students looked only to the motivations and intentions of inventors rather than to broader social or economic trends. And in studying the American Revolution, students displayed little understanding of issues of taxation, representation, or the relationship between England and the colonies; instead, they interpreted the conflict as a contest of wills between individuals who were upset that they were not getting their way. Because their encounters with these topics had taken place in very different contexts, the consistency of their responses suggests that this was a key characteristic of their understanding of history.

History of race and gender relations

At the beginning of the year, students already knew that women and minorities were treated differently in the past; they had learned about these topics from television and movies, from discussions with their parents, and from previous instruction at school. Although the history of race and gender relations did not occupy a great deal of instructional time during this study, these topics interested students and occasionally were a focus of instruction. Around the time of the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday, the classes watched and discussed a video, *A Time for Justice*, that focused on the collective actions of African Americans in the 1950s to end segregation and other forms of institutional discrimination. In one class, students became interested in the topic of slavery when their teacher read a biography of George Washington, so she then read selections from *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad.*[17] And near the end of the year, to give students experience with primary sources, one teacher led students in discussing a set of letters from Abigail Adams to her husband, John Adams, during the Constitutional Convention. Race and gender relations, however, were never a sustained and systematic topic of study.

When asked to explain the history of race and gender relations, students drew from these diverse sources to create accounts that focused on the actions and intentions of individuals. In explaining their understanding of discrimination, students referred not to societal influences such as laws, politics, or economics, but to individual attitudes. Kenny, for example, observed that "people wanted other people to do their work, because they started getting lazy; they got Black people—since they thought Black people weren't as good as White people and that—they wouldn't give them very good clothing or food or anything, and then they would have to do their work, for the White people."

Similarly, Tonya noted that African Americans were slaves because "the White people were being greedy," and Laura thought women were treated differently in the past "cause men would not share." Mandy also thought that women were treated differently because men "were bossier, like, they made the women do stuff that the men should do also."

In discussing historical changes in these areas, students also focused on individuals, particularly the efforts of famous people. Susan said that slavery ended "because Abraham Lincoln changed it"; Jean pointed out that "Abraham Lincoln set them free, and now we like them much better"; and Curtis said that Lincoln "was trying to get the Blacks to stop being slaves and stuff." Students also often mentioned Martin Luther King, Jr., as having brought about these changes. In the following interview (conducted at the beginning of the year), Kenny and Kathy explicitly address the role of famous people in bringing about changes in attitudes:[18]

KENNY: We found out it's not fair to women to stay at home and do all the work, while the men go to work and get paid for it [inaudible]. Now the father and mother both can work with jobs and get more money.

INTERVIEWER: So why do you think people decided that it wasn't fair? Why do you think that now people think that's not fair, and a long time ago . . .

KATHY: Because they used to treat Black people like that. Till Martin Luther King came along, and he stopped that.

KENNY: And now there are people like Martin Luther King, but for women's rights.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think there are people like that now, and there weren't a long time ago?

KENNY: I think some people, presidents, Abraham Lincoln, people have changed that over the years. Important people, famous people, have changed that over the years, and given other people their rights.

Similarly, during another interview later in the year, Michael explained how African Americans were treated differently in the past, and in the following passage he and Dwayne explain why that has changed:

INTERVIEWER: So you think that's something that's changed over time?

MICHAEL: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that's changed?

MICHAEL: Martin Luther King.

DWAYNE: And just the presidents.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean?

DWAYNE: Like, they make change; like, what's best for the world.

Nichole also pointed to the influence of Martin Luther King:

> Well, he said a speech, and then everybody started realizing that the Black people were the same as them—and they thought they were just animals and stuff—and they started realizing that they were the same as them, they needed to treat them how they would want to be treated; they have feelings and all that stuff, too.

Kathy even suggested that Martin Luther King was responsible for changes in women's rights: "He probably changed it, because Black people didn't have rights, and the women didn't have rights either."

History of everyday life

Students also focused on individuals when they studied changes in everyday life—areas such as clothes, games, sports, food, medicine, and entertainment. Once again, students began the year with some background knowledge of these topics, and both classes spent several weeks investigating them further as they prepared individual essays and group displays for a "History Museum." Students themselves were largely responsible for the content of their investigations: working in groups, they chose topics, developed lists of questions that interested them, identified resources, took notes, and organized their information into displays. Their teachers worked extensively with students to help them plan and conduct these inquiries, but they provided no direct historical instruction to students; instead, they encouraged students to make observations and draw their own conclusions from the sources they consulted (which included trade books, encyclopedias, physical artifacts, and family and community members).

Most of these projects focused on technology and material culture, and nearly all were purely descriptive; students described changes over time but did not address the reasons behind these changes. When asked in interviews to explain their understanding of change, students again pointed to the efforts of individuals. Brandon, for instance, said that machines had changed "because we have more technology, since Thomas Edison and everything has come along; they didn't have that back then." Charles said that transportation had changed over time "because a person invented the car and everything," and Susan also thought that cars had changed because "someone came into the world, and they were smart, and they just thought that [pointing to a picture of an old car] wasn't enough car, like, you could only carry two people, so they thought it wasn't enough, or they thought it was just too hard to drive." And Brett noted that baseball used to be played without gloves, but since the ball could hurt your hand, "a smart person came up with gloves."

In explaining why these inventions arose, students did not suggest connections to broader economic or social changes but only to the motivations of individuals. Dwayne, for example, thought that things change "because they're just, like, inventing new, trying to invent new things so they could be rich." Similarly, Travis said that things have changed "cause there's been a lot of, like, inventors, and, like, lazy people—not that I'm calling inventors lazy people, but they just want life to be easier—so they try to invent easier ways of doing things." Curtis provided one of the few exceptions to this belief that technological developments can be attributed to the discrete efforts of particularly smart individuals: When asked what he wondered about in history, he said, "Cars and stuff; I still wonder how they came up with the idea of them, because it's, like, one person didn't just say, 'Hey, let's make a car today,' or anything like that."

The American Revolution

The most striking instance of students' focus on individuals came as they studied the events leading to the American Revolution.[19] Students knew very little about this topic as the year began, and they relied almost entirely on their teacher (and this researcher) for information. To prepare students for anticipated instructional activities (such as a debate over colonial taxation), the teacher explained the sources of tension between England and the North American colonies; over the course of several days, she described the expansion of French and English settlement, the series of wars in the colonies between the two countries, the taxes instituted by the British to pay for protection of the colonies, and the American colonists' resentment of being taxed without being represented in Parliament.

As students responded to questions during these explanations, it became clear that their understanding of the topic was different than what their teacher had anticipated. Although she emphasized conflicts between political entities and over political principles, students' responses focused on individuals. When asked to predict the result of French and English expansion in North America, for example, several students thought the settlers themselves would get into a war because they "didn't like each other that much"; Kathy thought they would be mad at each other because they didn't understand each other's language. One student who was cast as an English settler during a role-play noted that the English wanted more land "so we can build more houses back in England and buy jewels for the king and queen." Frequently referring to the French and English as "teams," students displayed little awareness that the French and Indian Wars occurred because two countries were at war over territory rather than because individual settlers ran into each other and got mad.

It also became clear that students had little understanding of what taxes are, who establishes them, how they are collected, or what they are used for.[20] Realizing how crucial this was to the study of the Revolution, the teacher deviated from her plans for several days to engage the class in discussion, explanation, and simulations on the topic of taxation. Although most students were then able to explain the function of taxes—as well as to explain that England

increased taxes on the colonies in order to pay for the French and Indian Wars—they still failed to understand accurately why the colonists were upset about these taxes. During her explanation of taxation, the teacher showed students a page of illustrations on the topic from an encyclopedia; these included a cartoon of a woman beating a colonial tax collector with a broom, and this image seemed to provide students with their central understanding of the conflict over taxation. Students consistently maintained that colonists did not like the taxes because the tax collectors came and surprised them in their homes. Despite their teacher's repeated assertions to the contrary, many students adamantly maintained that colonists were upset because they weren't given enough warning that they would have to pay taxes.

In trying to help students understand why people today pay their taxes without starting a war, the teacher emphasized that now citizens elect representatives who make the laws governing taxation, and the colonists could not do so. Students' understanding of government and representation was as undeveloped as their understanding of taxation; but again, after days of explanation and discussion, they were able to explain in a basic way how legislators are elected and how laws are made.[21] Nonetheless, many students held fast to their belief that people today don't object to taxes as strongly as the colonists did because now they know that they will have to pay, and they have time to prepare. Several others—perhaps convinced by their teacher's repeated assertion that being surprised had nothing to do with it—thought the key problem with taxation in the colonies was that taxes were too high, and the colonists didn't have the money to pay them. As Charles said, "People pay taxes now because they're not coming around and taking your most valuable things."

Students' newly developing understanding of taxation and representation had little impact on them as they met in small groups to prepare for a debate over the issue of independence for the colonies. Students on both sides of the issue consistently failed to consider the importance of representation and displayed no understanding of the governmental relationship between England and the colonies. The colonial side in the debate, for example, simply tried to come up with excuses for why they should not have to pay taxes, such as, "They fought the war, why should we have to pay?" Similarly, the British side could not imagine what the colonists would say, other than that the taxes were too high. Once it was explained to them that the colonists would be upset because they could not vote, students on the British side decided they would just let them vote.

It also took a long time to convince the colonial group that they needed to focus on the issue of representation; they planned simply to tell the British that they would pay off what they owed in monthly amounts, and then they were going to be their own country. When asked what they were going to do when the British told them they couldn't just be their own country, it was obvious they had not thought about that possibility, and they were adamant the British could not do that. As Gary said, "We're in charge of our own stuff!" When it

was explained that in fact the British were in charge and were in a position to prevent the colonies from becoming their own country, students refused to accept it; they seemed to think that England was just some kind of a big bully. Brandon asserted, "They're not in charge of us!" and Kathy explained that they would tell them, "We don't care about your reasons, we're going to go off and make our own government." Although students eventually appeared to make progress in developing arguments that focused on the political issues involved, they made little use of these arguments once the debate began; the debate itself did not amount to much more than one side saying, "We don't want to pay," and the other responding, "You have to."

In the other classroom as well, the debate amounted to little more than a contest of wills. The colonists maintained that they didn't want the protection of British troops, so they shouldn't have to pay for it. John (representing the British) asked the colonists, "Why did you leave in the first place?" and received the following series of responses:

JENNY: Cause you let us leave, so it's your fault if you're mad at us now.
JESSE: We wanted to have freedom from you guys.
NICHOLE: But we got more taxes.
TRAVIS: That's why we left, because we didn't want taxes on our tea.
DARREN: We still are part of your country, but we want to be independent. You wouldn't want your mom hanging around all the time.
JENNY: How would you feel if someone took all your money and gave it away, and you wouldn't have money to buy food?

Exasperated by students' lack of attention to the political issues involved, the teacher interrupted the debate to explain to students just how far off base their arguments were (something I never saw her do on any other occasion). As she discussed the issues with students, they continued to display fundamental misconceptions about the economic and political relationships between England and the colonies—including the belief that it was the English government that directly supplied the colonies with provisions, and confusion over why the colonies could not buy goods from some other country with lower taxes. Fifth-grader Nichole aptly summarized students' understanding of the Revolution when she noted in an interview, "If those people wouldn't'a fought for us and got our freedom, we'd still be bossed around by the queen and stuff."

Discussion

Students in this study consistently focused on individual actions and intentions in history and ignored or misunderstood the role of political, economic, or other societal institutions. The variety of contexts in which this pattern emerged suggests that it was neither a peripheral aspect of their understanding nor a result of poor instruction, but a central characteristic of their perception of

historical information. Students had learned about the history of race and gender relations, for example, from many sources, most of them outside their current classroom; they drew from those diverse sources of information to construct an explanation that focused on the role of famous people in changing individual attitudes. Their knowledge of the American Revolution, on the other hand, came almost entirely from classroom instruction; but although their teachers explicitly addressed the political and economic context of the conflict, students continued to think in terms of people surprised in their homes by tax collectors. And when students independently investigated changes in everyday life, they concluded that these changes had come about because of the motivations of individual inventors.

Other research on elementary children's historical understanding reveals similar patterns. Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin, for example, found that when students began 5th grade, they thought of European explorers of North America as individual hobbyists or entrepreneurs rather than as commissioned agents of European governments. After instruction on the topic, students knew that explorers were commissioned but failed to understand the larger political or economic contexts of their voyages; they attributed the reasons for exploration to the personal motives of monarchs rather than the pursuit of national interests. Similarly, after studying the colonization of North America, most students did not understand the economic principles or processes involved—instead attributing colonization to personal rivalry among monarchs—and did not understand that the colonies were governed by European nations.[22]

Findings from other studies can be explained in much the same way. Students interviewed by McKeown and Beck had read about "no taxation without representation" but interpreted their reading in terms of colonists getting angry, a British colonel being strong, the king ending taxes, and people "quieting down."[23] Although McKeown and Beck refer to this as a "surface" narrative, it actually amounts to the transformation of a political narrative into a personal one; students focused on individual actions and intentions rather than on political and economic structures and processes. Similarly, Britt and her colleagues found that one of the most common problems in students' retelling of their reading about the building of the Panama Canal was that they focused on a "substory" of the passage they had read rather than the "main story"—yet every single student told one specific substory, that of how workers overcame disease. The main story that they failed to tell was about how the United States received permission to build the canal.[24] Clearly this was not a reading problem, as Britt and her colleagues imply. Students did not simply miss the main point; they interpreted the text the way they understand history—by ignoring political institutions and focusing on individual actions and intentions.

Nor are such interpretations limited to 4th and 5th graders. Lee, Dickinson, and Ashby found that when students from ages 7 to 14 were asked to choose which factors explained the Roman success in invading Britain, many chose

statements that provided reasons for the invasion but had no direct causal relationship to its success. When asked to explain their answers, many students "converted" these reasons into direct causes by pointing to the individual desire or determination of the emperor or the Roman troops. Students made suggestions such as, "Claudius would shout at them and threaten to kill them if they didn't win" and "Everybody kept on laughing at Claudius so he wanted to show that he was a good emperor."[25] Similarly, Halldén found in his observations of a Swedish secondary classroom that students explained historical events by examining the possible motives individuals had for their actions, and they were impervious to other types of explanations. Despite the fact that instruction in the class focused on social forces and institutions, students interpreted information only at the level of the actions and motives of individuals.[26] Finally, Carretero and his colleagues found that both 6th and 8th graders were more likely to identify intentional, personal factors than structural, political, or economic forces in explaining historic events.[27]

These findings are also consistent with research on the general development of children's concepts about society. Studies consistently show that elementary students have little understanding of political institutions and economic systems. Research on the political socialization of children, for example, has repeatedly found that although they widely recognize the president and various political symbols (such as the flag and George Washington), they have little understanding—particularly before 5th grade—of political parties, taxes, the legislative and judicial branches of the government, or the difference between governmental and nongovernmental institutions.[28]

Research on students' economic understanding also indicates that before age 11, most students do not know how wages or prices are arrived at, and they do not know how money flows through commercial exchanges; they often fail to understand, for example, what happens to the money paid for goods in a store and think of banks as simple storage places for coins and bills.[29] Furth describes the development of children's thinking about such social institutions as a move from personal to societal thinking: Younger children confuse personal and social roles, think of societal events as the result of the personal wishes of individuals, and have no understanding of government or community, while older children come to see the societal life of a community as an interrelated whole with institutions, roles, and customs. Furth argues that most children at ages 9 and 10 (the age of most students in this study) still have an incomplete understanding of the societal aspects of human life.[30]

If students have little understanding of social institutions, then it is not surprising that they interpret history in terms of individual actions and intentions. Yet such interpretations are in important respects misinterpretations and suggest the need for explicit attention in the elementary history curriculum. The civil rights movement, for example, was not primarily an attempt to change individual attitudes, nor were its accomplishments the result of the efforts of a few individuals. The civil rights movement addressed the legality of

institutional segregation, such as discrimination in public accommodations, electoral procedures, and the judicial system. The movement itself consisted of collective political and economic efforts and depended on the organizational efforts of churches and other social organizations. Understanding the movement requires that students understand what both "civil" and "rights" mean; they need to learn about the collective action of citizens to change laws and institutional practices. Segregation affects individuals, and social movements depend on individuals; but if students think of the civil rights movement primarily as an attempt by Martin Luther King, Jr., to change the prejudiced attitudes of European Americans, then they have misunderstood this part of history.

Similarly, the American Revolution was not about people being surprised by tax collectors and hitting them over the head with brooms. The American Revolution was fought to change political systems, and economic factors—mercantilism, taxation, boycotts—figured heavily in the conflict. Again, it was individuals who engaged in this dispute, and the Revolution had effects on individuals; but if students do not understand the institutional context within which these actions took place, then there is no reason for them to study the topic. The importance of the Revolution lies in its ability to shed light on the nature of political and economic conflict; if students come away with no deeper understanding than that there was a war to keep people from being "bossed around by the queen," it cannot be said that they have understood the topic at all.

The *National Standards for United States History* repeatedly recognizes the importance of societal institutions in history. In studying the American Revolution, for example, students in 5th grade and above are expected, among other things, to explain the overhaul of English imperial policy following the Seven Years' War; compare the arguments advanced by defenders and opponents of the new imperial policy on the traditional rights of English people and the legitimacy of asking the colonies to pay a share of the costs of empire; explain the major ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence and their sources; analyze relationships with France, Holland, and Spain during the Revolution and the contributions of each European power to the American victory; and explain how the Revolution altered the social, political, and economic relations among different groups. Indeed, practically every standard is predicated on the assumption that students will understand political, economic, religious, and other societal institutions and forces.[31]

Although the history standards for grades K-4 are less extensive and generally less specific than those for older students, they also include attention to the role of societal institutions in human affairs. Students in kindergarten and above are expected to explain the reasons for and effects of European exploration in the fifteenth and sixteenth century; explain that the U.S. government was formed by English colonists who fought for independence from England; and explain the importance of basic principles of American democracy, including equal protection of the law, majority rule, limitations on government, and representative government. Students in 3rd and 4th grade, meanwhile, are expected to describe major historical events in their states; analyze geographic, economic, and religious reasons for early exploration and settlement of their state or region; explain the migrations of Vietnamese, Cubans, and Haitians; and describe the signing of the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence, and the writing of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Emancipation Proclamation.[32] Each of these expectations requires that students understand basic societal institutions.

Such understanding cannot be taken for granted. Both the present study and related research demonstrate that few students in 5th grade or before understand the nature and purpose of societal institutions or their role in human affairs. When students encounter historical content that revolves around those institutions, they interpret that content in light of their understanding of individual actions and intentions—and these interpretations may significantly distort the content they are expected to learn. In planning elementary history instruction, then, educators should remember that students must not only study content about particular events in the past, but also learn about the social relations that make those events meaningful. If students study the American Revolution without understanding taxation and representation, or study the civil rights movement without understanding legal segregation, they will fail to comprehend their history instruction in a meaningful way.

These findings suggest that history instruction should take place within the context of an integrated social studies program rather than as a separate or isolated topic. If students learn about economic systems, the functions of government, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and the interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions—all recommended in the curriculum standards of the National Council for the Social Studies—then they may be able to connect historical information to a meaningful network of social understanding.[33] The teachers in this study drew precisely that conclusion: They decided that in the future they would need to develop more fully students' understanding of taxation and representation and that they would need to do so before discussing the Revolution itself.

Any topic in history requires attention to such issues. Studying the Civil War, for example, requires attention to (at the very least) the difference between state and federal government and the economics of staple crop production and industrial manufacture. Studying World War II requires attention to economic depression, political parties, and international relations. Studying the civil rights movement requires attention to legal constraints on individual behavior, the function of the Constitution and judicial system in developing and enforcing laws, and the role of organizations in promoting or impeding societal changes. Few topics in history—if any—can be understood solely by focusing on individuals.

Such observations are not meant to imply that social studies content should expand to fill the entire elementary curriculum. But students already study

topics that relate to societal institutions and relations—presidents, wars, heroes, exploration, and so on—and national standards in history recommend increasing the attention to such topics. Less often do students encounter the related social studies content necessary to make such historical study meaningful. This research indicates that if history is divorced from an integrated exploration of the institutional forms of social life, students may come away with understandings very different than teachers and curriculum planners intend. Simply increasing the amount of history students encounter is unlikely to increase the extent of their historical understanding.

Conclusions

Throughout the year, students demonstrated little understanding of the role of societal institutions in shaping historical developments; instead, they looked solely to individual actions and intentions to explain what happened in the past. In explaining changes in material life, students pointed to the actions and motivations of individual inventors and had little sense of how changes related to wide social and economic patterns. Students also thought of changes in the treatment of women and minorities as being the result of changes in individual attitudes (due to the efforts of famous individuals), not a societal process that involved changes in laws and institutions. The clearest example of students' lack of attention to institutional factors arose during their study of the American Revolution. Despite constant attention to the underlying cause of the conflict, students showed little understanding of the governmental relationship between England and the colonies or of the significance of representation and taxation. In each case, students' focus on individuals stood in the way of more complete understandings of these topics. This research suggests that students should study history within the context of an integrated social studies program that addresses the societal context of human affairs rather than as an isolated topic that focuses solely on famous people and events.

Notes

1. See e.g. Charlotte Crabtree, "Returning History to the Elementary Schools," in *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, Ed. Paul Gagnon and The Bradley Commission on History in the Schools (New York: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 173–87; Diane Ravitch, "Tot Sociology, or What Happened to History in the Grade Schools?" *American Scholar* 56 (Summer 1987): 343–54; and National History Standards Project, *National Standards for History for Grades K-4: Expanding Children's World in Time and Space* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1994), *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1994), and *National Standards for World History: Exploring Paths to the Present* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1994).
2. Jere Brophy, Bruce A. VanSledright, and Nancy Bredin, "Fifth-graders' Ideas About History Expressed Before and After Their Introduction to the Subject,"

Theory and Research in Social Education 20 (Fall 1992): 440–89; Matthew Downey, "After the Dinosaurs: Elementary Children's Chronological Thinking" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 1994); Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, "'They Still Use Some of Their Past': Historical Salience in Elementary Children's Historical Thinking," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 28 (September/October 1996): 531–76; Linda S. Levstik and Christine C. Pappas, "Exploring the Development of Historical Understanding," *Journal of Research and Development in Education* 21 (Fall 1987): 1–15.
3. Margaret McKeown and Isabel Beck, for example, refer to 5th and 6th graders' knowledge of the American Revolution as consisting of "simple associations and a lack of connected structures," while Jere Brophy, Bruce A. VanSledright, and Nancy Bredin similarly point to "only spotty knowledge" and "bits and pieces of information" that are "not yet subsumed within a systematic network of knowledge." Margaret G. McKeown and Isabel L. Beck, "The Assessment and Characterization of Young Learners' Knowledge of a Topic in History," *American Educational Research Journal* 27 (Winter 1990): 719; Jere Brophy, Bruce A. VanSledright, and Nancy Bredin, "What Do Entering Fifth Graders Know About U.S. History?" *Journal of Social Studies Research* 16/17 (Spring 1993): 2–19.
4. Keith C. Barton, "Elementary Students' Understanding of History—An Overview," *Social Education* 61 (January 1997): 13–16; Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, "'Back When God Was Around and Everything': Elementary Children's Understanding of Historical Time," *American Educational Research Journal* 33 (Summer 1996): 419–54; Linda S. Levstik, "The Relationship Between Historical Response and Narrative in a Sixth-grade Classroom," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 14 (Winter 1986): 1–19, and "Historical Narrative and the Young Reader," *Theory into Practice* 28 (Spring 1989): 114–19; Levstik and Barton, "Historical Salience"; Bruce A. VanSledright and Jere Brophy, "Storytelling, Imagination, and Fanciful Elaboration in Children's Historical Reconstructions," *American Educational Research Journal* 29 (Winter 1992): 837–59.
5. See, for example, James F. Eaton, C. W. Anderson, and E. L. Smith, "Students' Misconceptions Interfere with Science Learning: Case Studies of Fifth-grade Students," *Elementary School Journal* 84 (March 1984): 365–79; Hugh Helm and Joseph D. Novak (Eds.), *Proceedings of the International Seminar: Misconceptions in Science and Mathematics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1983); Peter W. Hewson and Mariana G. A. Hewson, "An Appropriate Conception of Teaching Science: A View from Studies of Science Learning," *Science Education* 72 (October 1988): 597–614; Joseph Nussbaum and Shimshon Novick, "Alternative Frameworks, Conceptual Conflict and Accommodation: Toward a Principled Teaching Strategy," *Instructional Science* 11 (December 1982): 183–200.
6. See especially Jere Brophy, Bruce VanSledright, and Nancy Bredin, *Fifth-graders' Ideas About European Exploration of the New World Expressed Before and After Studying This Topic Within a U.S. History Course*, Elementary Subjects Center Series No. 78 (East Lansing, MI: Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects, Institute for Research on Teaching, College of Education, Michigan State University, 1992); *Fifth-graders' Ideas About the English Colonies in America Expressed Before and After Studying Them Within a U.S. History Course*, Elementary Subjects Center Series No. 80 (East Lansing, MI: Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects, Institute for Research on Teaching, College of Education, Michigan State University, 1992); *Fifth-graders' Ideas About the Westward Expansion of the United States Prior to the Civil War Expressed Before and After Studying the Topic Within a U.S. History Course*, Elementary Subjects Center Series No. 82 (East Lansing, MI: Center for the

Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects, Institute for Research on Teaching, College of Education, Michigan State University, 1992); and "What Do Entering Fifth Graders Know?"; Margaret G. McKeown and Isabel L. Beck, "The Assessment and Characterization of Young Learners' Knowledge of a Topic in History," *American Educational Research Journal* 27 (Winter 1990): 688–726.

7. For recent empirical studies, see Linda S. Levstik, "Building a Sense of History in a First Grade Classroom," in *Advances in Research on Teaching*, vol. 4 of *Research in Elementary Social Studies*, Ed. Jere Brophy (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1993), pp. 1–31; Bruce A. VanSledright, "The Teaching-Learning Interaction in American History: A Study of Two Teachers and Their Fifth Graders," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 19 (Spring 1995): 3–23.
8. Roy N. Hallam, "Logical Thinking in History," *Educational Review* 19 (June 1967): 183–202; "Piaget and Thinking in History," in *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History*, Ed. Martin Ballard (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 162–78; "Thinking and Learning in History," *Teaching History* 2, no. 8 (1972): 337–46; see also the comments in Martin Booth, "Skills, Concepts, and Attitudes: The Development of Adolescent Children's Historical Thinking," *History and Theory* 22 (December 1984): 101–17.
9. See especially Peter Seixas, "Conceptualizing the Growth of Historical Understanding," in *Handbook of Education and Human Development: New Models of Learning, Teaching, and Schooling*, Ed. D. Olson and N. Torrance (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 765–83; and "Historical Understanding Among Adolescents in a Multicultural Setting," *Curriculum Inquiry* 23 (Fall 1995): 301–27; see also Keith C. Barton, "'My Mom Taught Me': The Situated Nature of Historical Understanding" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1995), and Levstik and Barton, "Historical Salience."
10. Barton, "The Situated Nature of Historical Understanding" and "Did the Devil Just Run out of Juice? Elementary Children's Historical Perspective-taking Ability" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, April 1996).
11. Keith C. Barton, "Narrative Simplifications in Elementary Children's Historical Thinking," in *Advances in Research on Teaching: Vol. 6. History Teaching and Learning*, Ed. Jere Brophy (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1996).
12. On principles of effective subject matter instruction, see especially Thomas L. Good and Jere Brophy, *Looking in Classrooms* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994); and Richard Prawat, "Teaching for Understanding: Three Key Attributes," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 5, no. 4 (1989): 315–28.
13. Other topics in history came up throughout the year outside the time set aside for formal history instruction. Near the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, for example, both classes watched and discussed a video on the history of the civil rights movement. Historical fiction was also a prevalent part of students' reading experience. The 5th graders read both George Elizabeth Speare's *The Sign of the Beaver* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983) and Michelle Margorian's *Good Night, Mr. Tom* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986) as part of their study of literature, and the 4th grade class read Theodore Taylor's *The Cay* (New York: Doubleday, 1969). Throughout the year, I frequently noticed students reading historical fiction independently.
14. I interviewed all students in groups of two and conducted four different series of interviews spaced throughout the school year. Over the course of the year, I interviewed 33 students during a total of 29 interviews; 14 students were interviewed more than once. (See Appendixes for a full description of the materials and protocol used.)

15. I observed on 63 occasions—beginning in August and continuing until March (the last time during the year when formal instruction was devoted to history)—for a total of approximately 90 hours (not including time spent in interviews). History was typically scheduled for an hour a day, three days a week, and I tried always to be there at the times it was scheduled; over the course of the year, I attended approximately 80 percent of the class sessions devoted to history. Special projects often began earlier or extended later than scheduled, and I tried to remain for those times whenever possible. I also accompanied the classes on three field trips related to history.
16. Seixas, "Historical Understanding."
17. Charles Guggenheim, *A Time for Justice: America's Civil Rights Movement* (Montgomery, AL: Teaching Tolerance, 1992); Ellen Levine, *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad* (New York: Scholastic, 1992).
18. To increase readability, responses that consist only of acknowledging partners' answers (such as "Yeah" or "Uh-huh") have been omitted.
19. During this unit of study, I observed primarily in the 4th grade classroom, and the following descriptions are based on those students except where otherwise noted.
20. This first became clear when the teacher began a chart comparing what taxes are used for now and what they would have been used for in the colonial era. The first student who volunteered gave examples of how taxes were used to build roads and pay teachers; the other students then decided that taxes were used to pay for all buildings and to pay all salaries. They did not understand the relationship between government and taxation, and they did not realize that the price they pay for an item at a store goes partly to pay suppliers, partly to pay taxes, and partly for profit. Many students, for example, thought that stores decide how much the tax will be, and there was little evidence that any students understood the concept of profit. Students also had difficulty differentiating between private businesses and government institutions.
21. Although students had heard of Congress, they did not know what it was; many believed that laws are made by the president, and that members of Congress are appointed by the president to "help him." One student even thought that the president is elected as the direct result of televised debates.
22. Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin, *Ideas About European Exploration*.
23. Margaret G. McKeown and Isabel L. Beck, "Making Sense of Accounts of History: Why Young Students Don't and How They Might," in *Teaching and Learning in History*, Ed. Gaea Leinhardt, Isabel L. Beck, and Catherine Stainton (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), pp. 1–26.
24. M. Anne Britt, Jean-François Rouet, Mara C. Georgi, and Charles A. Perfetti, "Learning from History Texts: From Causal Analysis to Argument Models," in *Teaching and Learning in History*, Ed. Gaea Leinhardt, Isabel L. Beck, and Catherine Stainton (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), pp. 47–84.
25. Peter Lee, Alaric Dickinson, and Rosalyn Ashby, "Some Aspects of Children's Understanding of Historical Explanation" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1995).
26. Olaf Halldén, "Learning History," Oxford Review of Education 12 (March 1986): 53–66; "On the Paradox of Understanding History in an Educational Setting," in *Teaching and Learning in History*, Ed. Gaea Leinhardt, Isabel L. Beck, and Catherine Stainton (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), pp. 17–46.
27. Mario Carretero, Liliana Jacott, Margarita Limón, Asunción Lopez-Manjón, and Jose A. León, "Historical Knowledge: Cognitive and Instructional Implications," in *Cognitive and Instructional Processes in History and the Social Sciences*, Ed. Mario Carretero and James F. Voss (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), pp. 357–76.

28. David Easton and Jack Dennis, *Children in the Political System: Origins of Political Legitimation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1969); Fred I. Greenstein, *Children and Politics.* rev. Ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press): Robert D. Hess and Judith V. Torney, *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967); Stanley W. Moore, James Lare, and Kenneth A. Wagner, *The Child's Political World: A Longitudinal Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1985).
29. Anna E. Berti and Anna S. Bombi, *The Child's Construction of Economics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Gustav Jahoda, "The Development of Thinking About Socio-economic Systems," in *The Social Dimension: European Developments in Social Psychology*, vol. 1, Ed. Henri Tajfel (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 69–88.
30. Hans G. Furth, *The World of Grown-ups: Children's Conceptions of Society* (New York: Elsevier, 1980). Jan Vansina reports similar observations among a number of groups in eastern Africa; he notes that although children by age 10 understand individual kinship relations and the corresponding appropriate behaviors, they do not fully understand the economic, political, and ritual relations among kinship groups until approximately age 15. Jan Vansina, "Memory and Oral Tradition," in *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History*, Ed. Joseph Miller (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1980), pp. 262–79.
31. *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1994), pp. 72–80 and elsewhere.
32. *National Standards for History for Grades K-4: Expanding Children's World in Time and Space* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1994), especially pp. 41, 45, 48, 52, 55, 62.
33. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies).