

# RESEARCHING HISTORY EDUCATION

Theory, Method, and Context



LINDA S. LEVSTIK • KEITH C. BARTON

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## Theory, method, and context

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3. Do you think people were different, or acted differently, in the past? Why?
4. How do people find out about how things were different in the past?
5. If someone were trying to find out about the past and got different answers, how could he or she decide what it was really like?
6. What do you think history is?
7. Why do you think history is something people study?
8. Do you like studying history? (Are there any things you've done this year in history that you like or don't like?)
9. Did you ever study history at school before this year?
10. Have you ever learned about history or the past or long ago outside of school?
11. Those are all the questions I have for you. Do you have any questions for me, or any questions about the pictures?

## Chapter 9

# Narrative simplifications in elementary students' historical thinking

Keith C. Barton

National standards both in social studies and in U.S. and world history call for the study of history throughout the elementary grades. They recommend that students become familiar not only with the factual content of history but also with the nature of historical thinking and understanding (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994; National History Standards Project, 1994a, 1994b). Such recommendations represent a substantial change from the current pattern of instruction: At present, schools rarely devote much attention to history before fourth grade, and in the intermediate grades they typically emphasize a textbook-driven approach to coverage of factual details (Goodlad, 1984; Hammack et al., 1990; Shaver, Davis, & Helburn, 1978; Superka, Hawke, & Morrissett, 1980). Such a significant transformation of the curriculum would require extensive insight into how young children make sense of historical information, because instruction will be most effective if it builds on students' experience and takes into account the nature of their thinking in the area. But as Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin (1993) point out, studies of children's thinking in the social studies is much less developed than in other curricular areas. Although recent research on historical understanding has yielded some consistent findings (Barton, 1997), the scope and detail of such work has yet to match that conducted in science and mathematics.

One recurring theme in research on children's understanding of history is the importance of narrative form. Levstik and Pappas (1987) note that students as young as second grade consider history interesting when presented in the form of a story. Levstik (1986, 1989) also found that fifth and sixth graders were highly interested in historical fiction and biography and that their encounter with these forms of narrative led to particularly strong moral and emotional responses. VanSledright and Brophy (1992) noted that when asked to explain historical information, fourth and fifth graders tended to rely on the storytelling format with which they were familiar and that they often produced accounts that followed a logical narrative form but that mixed together accurate information with misconceptions and "imaginative elaborations" (p. 851). And Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin (1992a, 1992b) found that students'

understanding of American history was highly influenced by their encounter with literature and other story-like forms of presentation.

Each of those studies dealt with students' encounters with *particular* historical narratives—the battle of Gettysburg, the life of Helen Keller, the European exploration of the New World, and so on. The research reported here also identifies the impact of narrative but on a different aspect of children's historical thinking—their understanding of change over time. It deals less with their knowledge of specific episodes in the past than with their overall perception of historical trends, processes, and developments. The frequency with which these students simplified historical information into a narrative form—and the congruence of this simplification with research on the recall of fictional narratives—suggest a consistent pattern of thinking that calls for explicit attention in designing curricular content and instructional practices in the elementary grades.<sup>1</sup>

## Results

This research yielded information on several aspects of children's historical thinking—including the kinds of knowledge they brought with them to school, the social context in which their ideas had developed, their ability to take the perspective of people in the past, and their understanding of historical causation (Barton, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996). The present analysis focuses on just one aspect of their thinking—their tendency to simplify and distort information into a narrative form. Throughout the year, students' understanding of history regularly displayed three significant narrative patterns, each consistent with research on the comprehension and recall of fictional narratives. First, students thought of historical changes as having come about for purely logical reasons, as part of a rational development toward the present. Second, they placed all historical developments into a linear and uniform sequence of progress (or sometimes decline). Finally, students collapsed the spatial and temporal expanse of the past into a minimal number of people and events.

### History as rational development toward the present

At the beginning of the year, many students did not have clearly developed explanations for historical change. Sometimes the very fact of being old was taken as the reason why something was different; I asked Angie, for example, why she thought names in the past were different than those today, and she simply noted, "They're like old-fashioned." Similarly, when Tina asked students how several old appliances were different than modern ones, a student responded, "They're old-fashioned." In these cases, being "old-fashioned" seemed to be explanation enough. Even when students attempted to explain why things were different in the past, they sometimes displayed an almost teleological understanding of historical change—as though the past was just waiting

for the present to happen. The "household technology" group, for example, included the following caption with their display of a candle: "The candle was like a substitute for awhile for the light bulb." Similarly, the "food" group explained that milk used to come in bottles because "they didn't have cardboard," and people had milk delivered to their house because "they didn't have that many stores back then."

When I explicitly asked students why things had changed, though, most attempted to identify a reason. Since most of their examples of change over time were technological ones, their explanations usually straightforwardly identified "new inventions" or "coming up with new ideas." During class one day, for example, students had been discussing how bicycles looked in the past, and I asked why they thought they were different; someone said, "They hadn't come up with the ideas yet." Similarly, during an interview Michael explained that things change because "probably somebody had a problem [inaudible], and it changed something, kept on getting stuff like that, having better ideas and stuff." Jeremy also noted that "they just came up with new ideas," and Dwayne explained that things change because "they find more stuff, and there are people that invent more stuff, and back then they didn't have schools, so they weren't as smart as they are now, because of the schools."

The equation of "coming up with new ideas" and "getting smarter" was a common one. Kenny, for example, explained that "there's gotten to be smarter people in the world" and went on to explain that there are "more inventions that'll help us through our lives"; similarly, Darren said, "They discovered how new things work and how you use them; we just got smarter." Students did not always mean by "smarter," though, that people actually had developed greater innate intellectual abilities. During a discussion among students about how the kind of wheels on cars had changed, for example, Donny said that it was "because they got smarter over the years." Another student noted that "they probably figured out the first ones were not as good as others," and Donny added that they didn't have as many chemicals in the past. I asked Donny what he meant when he said they weren't as smart, and he observed, "They *were* as smart as us, but they hadn't discovered some of the stuff."

Students were highly resistant to attributing change to any factor other than a purely rational process. This tendency was particularly striking when I asked about changes in fashion. Heather, for example, suggested that styles had changed because "they got probably better materials to make things, like cotton." Similarly, in the following interview Kenny first attributes changes in fashion to technology: He thinks that we now have good materials (cotton, furs, and leather), whereas a long time ago they could only make clothes "from the animals." Both he and Curtis recognize that they cannot explain my example of other styles by resorting to technology, but Kenny still looks for another purely rational reason; Curtis, meanwhile, turns the discussion back to more obviously technological changes.



INTERVIEWER: Why have things changed?

KENNY: They've discovered more things, more technology, higher equipment from, I mean, they're getting stuff out of the rainforests, better medicines to keep people alive.

INTERVIEWER: All right, why do you think fashion has changed?

CURTIS: Because, look at over there [indicating a photograph]

KENNY: Well, really, still again, they're getting good—like, now we wear modern coats and furs and we wear leather jackets and everything, and we have good clothing made out of like cotton and everything, and all they had, is they would just take stuff from the animals they had, and we get stuff from other things.

INTERVIEWER: You also mentioned that women always wore hats. Why do you think that's changed? Because there's better technology?

BOTH: No.

KENNY: Well, probably those hats weren't very comfortable.

CURTIS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So why do you think they wore them?

KENNY: Maybe it could be a law or something, women would have to wear hats, or maybe it would just be the better thing to do.

CURTIS: And the styles changed from here, because you couldn't dye that many colors, they didn't know how to get many colors, because you could only dye like red and stuff.<sup>2</sup>

Students did sometimes consider that styles had changed for no rational reason—that the popularity of styles simply changes over time. This came up several times when students were working on a project on how names have changed. One group of girls had been discussing how some older names had gone out of style and were popular once again. I asked why that might be, and one said that someone might just start using that name, and then other people hear it and like it, and start using it too. I asked a group of boys a similar question, and Gary pointed out, "Over the generations, names and people change"; Donny added, "Everything changes, even hats." I asked why those things change, and one student said, "Styles just change"; another pointed out that "people think different things are cool."

The observation that styles may change for no rational reason, though, existed in an uneasy tension with the belief in technological progress, even within the same student. In one group, for example, Tonya referred back to the pictures we had looked at in an interview and said that like cars and clothes, "people have all changed, and when other things change, people like to change too, so their names get better along with all the other things that get better." Another student agreed, pointing out, "You don't want a really beautiful girl, and her name is Flossie, or a really cute boy, and his name is Oliver." When I asked them, though, if there were no cute boys or beautiful girls a long time ago—and that was why the names were ugly—all three of the girls partici-

pating in the discussion immediately said, "No." Amber pointed out that some names have gone out of style and sound old-fashioned, but that at one time, people thought they were popular and "high style." Jenny added, "We wouldn't think of naming our children now 'Mildred,' but then it might have been the most beautiful name in the world." Similar discussions frequently arose around the discussion of clothing, as students vacillated between their recognition that older styles may return and their conviction that some styles could never seem fashionable again. One student, for example, exhibited this tension between style and progress when he suggested that if bell bottoms come back into style, "they won't be as lame as they were back then . . . because there's like more threads and stuff that they can use now than they could probably use back then, and they can make it like better fashions."

Students also pointed to increasing rationality to explain why social relations, attitudes, and beliefs have changed over time. They nearly always asserted that these had changed because they had been proved wrong or "we figured it out" and sometimes suggested that there was a specific moment in time they were disproved. During a discussion of the Salem witch trials, for example, Greg asked his teacher why people don't still believe in witches. Kenny said confidently that it had been proved wrong—in a single trial at a specific point in history; Tina asked how he knew that, and he said, "Why wouldn't we believe, if it hadn't been proved wrong, would we just wake up one day and say, 'We don't believe in witches anymore?'" Similarly, during an interview Laura said that people don't believe in witches anymore because "some people proved that they could not be witches and they thought whoever could float was like a witch, cause they thought their specter was holding them up, and it's not true, cause why would your specter really want to hold you up?" Both Michael and John, in separate interviews, pointed to medical science as having ended belief in witches.

Of course, students' perspective on the relationship between scientific and supernatural explanations is not entirely incorrect: There is a connection between the rise of scientific rationality and the decline of other kinds of explanation, but students did not understand how gradual, uneven, and complicated this change has been. Rather, they thought that people simply believed in the supernatural until they learned otherwise. They gave similar explanations for changes in attitudes toward minorities and women. In the following interview, for example, Stu suggests that racial attitudes have changed because medical tests proved the equality of Blacks and Whites:

INTERVIEWER: You think there are fewer prejudiced people today than there used to be?

STU: Yeah, a long time ago there used to be like over half the continent of America, the United States was prejudiced, and now it's about a half of one-hundredth of the Americans are prejudiced.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that's changed?

TONYA: They realized that the Black people are humans.

STU: They just have different color skins cause they're in Africa and it protects their skin from getting sunburn.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think people realized that? What caused it to change?

STU: Tests and research and stuff, and like maybe a Black person got hurt and they took them to the hospital, and while they were at the hospital, maybe a doctor took a, took maybe a part of the skin, they had to do it in surgery, so they cut off part of the skin, and maybe took it to a lab, and got it tested.

Although students rarely created such elaborate hypothetical stories, they nonetheless generally credited changes in the social roles of both African Americans and women to the realization that older beliefs were wrong. In the following interview, for example, Allen and Robert explain why women are no longer treated differently than men:

ALLEN: Well, we figured it out, that everybody's equal to each other.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean, we figured it out?

ALLEN: Well, back then, we're not as smart; we always think, "Yeah, we're better than them [women]."

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that changed?

ALLEN: Because they're people, so are we.

ROBERT: People started realizing that women were really upset that they didn't care [about] women, and they're just as equal.

INTERVIEWER: So why do you think people didn't realize that back before this? I mean, why do you think there was a time when people didn't realize that women were equal with men?

ROBERT: We weren't as smart back then.

ALLEN: And they were just like—I don't know what started it, a fight could have started it—and they're all saying, "We're better."

Again, these students did not think of this change as stretching gradually over generations but as a sort of epiphany during which people realized that women were equal to men. Jenny also explained that people a long time ago took slaves "because they didn't know that Black people were the same as us," and Nichole agreed that "they didn't know that Black people had feelings, they thought they were the same as animals." They went on to explain why that changed:

NICHOLE: We learned about Martin Luther King, and how they brought the slaves over, and then some people started realizing that

JENNY: They were just as good.

Jenny explained in a later interview that people "have come to their senses, and they've found out that they're no different than us." Similarly, Mandy thought that attitudes have changed "because people went to school, they learned that that's wrong." (Her interview partner Brittany, however, pointed out, "You don't know how the teachers know, though; it has changed, I just don't know how.") Students sometimes credited Martin Luther King with causing people to "come to their senses": Nichole, for example, explained, "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."

### **History as uniform progress or decline**

With few exceptions, students thought of historical change not as a random, ambiguous, or cyclical process, but one of straightforward, linear, and generally beneficial progress. Kenny's summary of change over time was typical: "Better cars; they've gone from women [now] getting the exact same thing as men; now Black people have gone from being horrible people to being—they're the best athletes in the world, they've gone from bad to good—and the cars have gone from bad to good; everything has gotten better than before." Even when not casting historical developments in such explicitly beneficial terms, students saw the process of change as one that went in a single dominant direction; as a result, they often sequenced historical information in an "ideal" order, rather than in the more complicated combinations that actually occurred in the past.

One of the most noticeable features of students' understanding of historical change was their perception—like Kenny's—that everything has improved. In explaining why they thought some pictures were more recent than others, for example, students sometimes noted that various objects in the newer pictures are better: Jesse and Nichole both thought the modern picture went after the 1950s picture because the cars were better; Jenny thought the picture of slaves was the oldest because all the houses in the other pictures were better; and Brandon noted that in one recent picture "it looks like they have more advanced stuff." Moreover, my questions about change frequently prompted students to explain not only how things have changed but specifically how they have improved. Kenny, for example, explained at the beginning of the year that now we have "more higher tech stuff—better clothing, better houses, and more money if you have a job, and there's better schools." Michael also explained that cars, radios, and televisions have "got better," and Susan thought that everything had improved over time—"telephones, [...] cars, beds, washing machines, houses, schools." During their projects on changes in everyday life as well, students sometimes referred to the way in which things have improved; the entertainment group, for example, explained to their class-

mates that VCRs were “invented for better entertainment than just plain old TV.”

While it is hardly surprising that students regarded technological changes as improvements, they also frequently singled out clothes as having improved. Angie, for example, thought that clothes made the pictures easy to figure out “because they didn’t look sort of real good back then, and now they look sort of better and have more color and stuff in them.” In comparing the 1950s picture to one from 1886, Michael also pointed out that “they had better clothes, which was probably made better, like more machines,” and Brandon mentioned that the way people dress has changed because “now we can make more modern stuff and everything, they didn’t have sweatpants.” Jenny even thought that clothes had become cleaner over time: Placing a picture from the 1930s after one from the 1910s, she noted that “their clothes, they look a lot better there than they do here, cause these look dirty, and they look older; but these look like they’re new, and they look a lot cleaner.” Even purely stylistic changes were sometimes considered representative of improvement; Kathy, for example, said that clothing had gotten better over time “cause I wouldn’t really like wearing that stuff, I don’t know why, I just wouldn’t, like feathers in my hat and stuff.”

The belief that everything has improved over time even led students to deny what seemed to me clear evidence to the contrary. Dwayne, for example, placed a 1970s picture more recently than one showing some of the first cars and explained his placement by pointing out that the streets are straighter in the more recent picture—in spite of the fact that the streets in the older picture actually appeared straight, and the more recent one included a cul-de-sac. Dwayne then pointed to “the windows, look at the way they go out” in the recent picture; I asked him how that compared to the older picture, and he said, “They just have them plain”—this time in spite of the fact that both pictures showed houses with bay windows. Two other students thought the picture was more recent because the houses were bigger—even though both included two-story houses. Such attempts to force evidence into their perceptions of improvement were strikingly common.

During the year I encountered only a few instances of students spontaneously suggesting that anything had declined. When I asked Susan why she thought more people might have been buried near family members a long time ago, she suggested that it was because “they cared more about their families, and maybe now more people use drugs and are bugging their families.” Dwayne also concluded, after listening to a presentation on how work has changed over time, that people today are lazier, because they buy things from stores rather than making them themselves. And in a composition on how things have changed over the last two hundred years, Rhiannon also departed from the common opinion that clothes are better now by noting, “I think back then their stuff was better than now because they had more fancy clothes, and they kept their clothes longer and their clothes were more sturdier than now. Like they have so many pretty and thick dresses.”

During the final interviews of the year I explicitly asked students what things have gotten worse over time; in most cases students met the question with silence or long pauses. Some could not think of anything, but most came up with examples after a while. One student mentioned violence as something that has become worse, and another noted that people are not as religious as they used to be. The most common response, however, was to point to the environment. Kenny, for example, thought that “they probably didn’t have that much pollution back then,” and Jenny pointed to problems like the ozone layer. Similarly, Susan noted that “people back then would think that like, they would think about their environment, about like throwing things on the ground, they would think that would be bad; and take the Indians: they used everything, they’d kill a buffalo or something, and they would use everything in the buffalo’s body—they’d use their fur, their teeth, their bones, their meat.” When I asked why people don’t do that anymore, she and her partner replied in unison, “Because they don’t care.”

Students’ perception of linear progress was particularly apparent in the way they decided on the chronological order of certain pictures. One set, for example, included a drawing of people in an Antebellum city and a photograph of a family, with horse and carriage, moving west over a prairie in the 1880s. Students almost always placed the Antebellum picture *after* the more recent one, and their explanations were nearly identical: They invariably pointed out the more settled nature of the city. Jenny, for example, said, “Well, in this one [Antebellum], it has lots of buildings [. . .] and in this one it just has grass and fields and stuff like that.” Jesse put the Antebellum picture later because “the buildings, they’re not as big,” and Nichole added, “It’s like they’re out in the country, and this is when they’re all like in the city.” Angie explained that she placed the Antebellum picture more recently “because this has a city and everything,” and went on to explain, “Well, this doesn’t have like any cities or anything around it, and these people, they have wagons, but it has a city and nicer clothes and stuff right here.” Tonya said confidently, “I *know* it didn’t go from brick buildings to wagons and carriages *after* the brick buildings.” And Jeremy explained, “They didn’t have whole towns like that built before they had—they had plains before they had whole towns like that.” When students were faced with similar pictures at the end of the year, their responses—both their chronological placements and their explanations—were nearly identical to those they gave earlier.

The same pattern arose when students confronted a picture of an immigrant ship from 1906. Because they had studied immigrants earlier in the year, nearly every student immediately recognized the picture and said something like, “Oh, those are the immigrants.” But recognizing the content of the picture did not help most students place it in sequence; many thought that it must be the *oldest* picture because it showed people coming to America—and people had to come here before anything else in the pictures could have happened. Charles, for example, thought the picture showed the *Mayflower*, and even though his



interview partner Sean recognized it as a picture of immigrants going to Ellis Island, both agreed that it was the oldest picture in the set—coming before pictures of slaves, the Civil War, and the westward movement. Jeremy also knew it was a picture of immigrants, but thought they came at the same time as Columbus: “1492, Columbus sailed, and that’s when they found it, about 1500, in the 1500s.”

This picture of immigrants prompted somewhat more disagreement than others, however, and led to exchanges in which students debated whether or not it was the oldest. In the following excerpt, for example, Angie argues that it must be the oldest in spite of Tonya’s apparent suggestion that the “things on the boat” seem more recent:

**ANGIE:** They have to come over on the boat to get here.

**TONYA:** But look at all the things on the boat.

**ANGIE:** But they, it looks like these people are like immigrant people, and then these people [slaves] look like they have just come here or something; well, not have just come here, but they’ve been here for just a little while, not been here for very long.

Similarly, in the following exchange Nichole and Jenny consider whether immigration was a discrete experience that happened at the beginning of American history or whether it continued over a long period of time:

**NICHOLE:** Well, I think it should go all the way at the end, cause that’s the people coming to America, and the slaves weren’t here before the people were here.

**JENNY:** But there were other people already at America before some people [i.e., the immigrants in the picture] came over.

Later in the interview, Nichole argued that a picture of Lincoln had to come after the immigration picture “cause the people had to come over here before Abe Lincoln, before they had presidents, cause nobody would elect them, you know; they had to have people over here to elect the president.”

Throughout the interview tasks, students consistently ordered pictures according to their perception that historical development occurred in a simple and progressive sequence. Students thought that any point in history could be characterized by only one image and that these images stood in a definite chronological order: First people came here, and then they lived in buildings and elected presidents; first settlers moved, then they built cities. Even those students who correctly placed the immigrant picture *after* the Civil War and slavery pictures sometimes did so because they noticed tall buildings in the background—and tall buildings, they noted, had to come after the shacks and tents in the other pictures. As Curtis said, “They’ve already settled everywhere.” When students were faced with very different pictures that could have

come from the same time (Abraham Lincoln and an enslaved family, for instance, or immigrants arriving at Ellis Island and the first car), they nearly always found a justification for placing one picture earlier than the other.

Students’ perception of uniform development showed itself in class projects and discussion as well, as they consistently failed to recognize the diversity of images that might characterize any given point in history. The clearest example arose with regard to architecture. In designing their colonial museums, it was obvious that many students in Amy’s class believed that people during the Colonial Era lived in small log cabins. In one group, students remarked on the fact that even large families lived in small houses, because there were no two-story houses then. I asked them if they thought even rich people lived in small houses, and they agreed with Jenny’s observation that they did; she added that there were no architects back then. I showed these students several pictures of colonial mansions, and they were astounded: They repeatedly said things like, “That’s not from colonial times, is it?” Jenny finally concluded, “We’re thinking way too far back, like when the *Mayflower* came over.” (Even that observation, however, shows the linear nature of her perception: There *was* a time in history when everyone lived in small houses, but earlier than they thought.)

Occasionally students did point out that the pictures could not be placed in such a linear fashion, or suggested that the same point in history might be represented by a variety of images. Kenny, for example, thought the immigrant picture had to come before the first car because “everybody traveled by boat then, now there’s cars and things,” but his interview partner Curtis noted matter-of-factly, “But they had to go over the sea.” Similarly, Darren also pointed out that one of the pictures “could be even right now, cause they still have some log cabins in the woods.” Other students noted that the appearance of people in the pictures might be the result of their being poor—and thus not having good clothes or homes—rather than of the pictures’ being from long ago. And although Tonya was surprised when I told her that the picture of an Antebellum city came before a picture of horses and wagons, her partner Stu observed, “Well, then that’s in Philadelphia, and this is in Texas,” and went on to say, “The modern technology would be different between states.”

One of the more interesting exceptions to students’ perception of linear progress came in an interview with Jeremy and Gary. Early in the interview, Gary thought that a picture of slaves was one of the oldest, because if it were any more recent, “there’d be a road or something,” and there would be a different house and fewer trees; his partner Jeremy, though, thought that it took place at the same time as the picture of the Kennedy-Nixon debate because “these people are dressed almost the same as these people, except they’re poor.” Later in the interview, though, Gary turned the tables on Jeremy. In the following excerpt, Gary points out that Jeremy’s perception of change over time is too simple:

**JEREMY:** [People] used to talk like [violently and with an accent], “Give me

whiskey!" Now they talk more like [softer and with no accent], "Give me my whiskey."

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that's changed?

JEREMY: Well, because they all used to live out in the country and everything, just their accent.

GARY [with exaggerated accent]: People still talk like 'at.

JEREMY: Some people

GARY: I hate to bust your bubble, but . . .

Gary himself grew up in a part of the state where many people speak with a regional accent; he thus recognized that change has not been so linear as Jeremy suggested. Later in the interview, Jeremy said that the way people get their food has changed over time, and again Gary corrected him:

JEREMY: They don't just go out in the woods with a gun, now people

GARY: People still do that.

JEREMY: Yeah, I know, but not in the city, see like, in this city, in this town [in the Antebellum picture], people go out in the woods and kill their own food, but now you go to the store and buy your own food.

Having grown up in a region where hunting is still common, Gary again recognized that Jeremy's formulation was too simple. (Note also that Jeremy's view was so linear that he even thought people in cities a long time ago would have hunted for their food.) Still later, Gary mentioned that "back when the cowboys and Indians were around, some people were rough and tough and rowdy, shot people." When I asked him if he thought that has changed, he said, "A little bit, but people still get shot a lot."

Students also displayed some of their diversity of understanding of this issue one day when I asked a group that was watching a video of *Miracle on 34th Street* when they thought it was made. John thought it had to be made before *Wizard of Oz* because that was the first color movie, and *Miracle on 34th Street* was in black and white. Jenny (the same student who a week earlier thought all colonial houses were small) pointed out that it didn't have to be earlier because the two movies might have "different producers." John then argued that it had to be a long time ago because of the way they talked; Jenny again pointed out, however, they talked differently because they have "a New York accent." John himself, meanwhile, had demonstrated some understanding of the diversity in history a few days earlier when he had been speculating on the food present in the Colonial Era: He observed, "Well, back in colonial days, we, they didn't—well, they might have—but I didn't think they had pizza or anything. They might have in Italy."

### History as limited in expanse

Students clearly did not understand the magnitude of the number of people involved in historical events. During a discussion of the French and Indian Wars, for example, one student said he didn't understand how Indians could have been on both sides, and Tina drew a simple chart showing that out of 10 Indians, five might have sided with the English and five with the French; one of the students pointed out that there would have been more than that on each side, "like hundreds, probably." Similarly, during a discussion of the Revolutionary War in Tina's room, it became clear that students did not understand that there were many thousands of soldiers, engaged in many different conflicts throughout the colonies; they thought there were simply two bodies of troops who kept meeting each other in battle. Students' observations while studying names also revealed how limited they perceived the past to be. They thought that anyone with the same last name as someone (or something) famous must have some intimate connection: One student thought that someone named Xavier was named after Xavier University, others thought a family named Montgomery was named after a local city, and still others thought anyone with the last name Kroger must have been named after the grocery chain.

Students also conceived of history as involving a limited number of discrete events, rather than lengthy and extensive processes. John, for example, explained slavery by noting that "during the Revolutionary War and stuff, people sailed down to Africa [. . .] to like get away from the war, and they found these Black people, and they thought they were monkeys or animals, and they thought they were really neat, and they crowded them up on boats and stuff, and sold them." Jenny explained the end of the witch trials in similar terms: "When they accused like the mayor's wife or somebody's wife that they were a witch, and he said, 'This has gone too far, we've killed enough innocent people, I want you to let everyone go, my wife is not a witch, and this has just gone too far,' and then just like that, everybody just forgot, and they didn't accuse people of witches anymore."

Several such examples came up in Tina's class during discussion of picture books set during the time of the American Revolution. Despite the fact that the books focused on the daily life of people at the time, students thought the people were all intimately involved with major political figures and events. Students noticed that the roofs on houses in one picture were very steep, for example, and Tina told me that Kenny was convinced that was so Revolutionary soldiers could hide on one side. She also pointed out that students thought the only thing women would have been doing at the time was sewing uniforms for soldiers. In another book, colonial soldiers raid the home of a family with Tory sympathies, and I overheard one student whisper, "Is this where Paul Revere is coming?"

The lack of recognition of the duration and extent of historical events was particularly noticeable when students talked about immigration. Rather than

perceiving it as a process that took place over several centuries and involved many millions of people, most described it as though it happened all at once, with a limited number of ships. Curtis, for example, thought that an immigrant ship in one picture was crowded because "they probably didn't have that many boats come over"; Nichole also explained, "I don't think there were that many immigrants coming over at that same time; this is one of the main ships that brought everybody over to America." Michael, meanwhile, thought that "it looks like it was when the queen and king went over to sail to get like more people."

This collapsing of historical events into a limited time frame was also prominent when students talked about race and gender. Most students clearly had no conception of the history of race relations in the United States as stretching over centuries and involving such diverse topics as slavery, segregation, and civil rights; all these were the same thing for them. Students consistently referred to a picture of African American soldiers on board a ship during World War II, for example, as "slavery." Angie thought it was "when they brought over the slaves," and Jenny said, "It looks like they're all coming out of the ship, or something, or the ones that lived at least." Students also referred to pictures of a civil rights protest and a segregated street scene, both from the 1950s, as "slavery."

In interviews, students frequently attributed changes in the rights of African Americans to the individual efforts of either Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King; moreover, some even thought that these two were responsible for women's rights. Brandon, for example, thought that Lincoln was responsible for women's getting the right to vote, and when I asked Kathy why women have more rights now than in the past, she attributed it to King: "He probably changed it, because Black people didn't have rights, and the women didn't have rights either." Sean also thought a picture of suffragists came at the same time as the Kennedy-Nixon debate because they carried banners that said "Freedom" and that meant "it's the civil rights movement," which happened "when John F. Kennedy was president." He then put the Civil War picture more recently because "Kennedy got shot during the civil rights movement, so then Lincoln came in and he stopped all of it, cause Lincoln was the one who settled it, after Dr. Martin Luther King got shot, Lincoln became president." He later pointed out that "Whites in the civil rights movement, they didn't even care about the Blacks, they used them for slavery, and people aren't like that any more."

Although Sean's explanation was more elaborate than most students', it captures well their lack of differentiation of historical events from widely divergent periods; their understanding of history had little room for any but the simplest story. After they had studied the American Revolution, for example, students in both classrooms assumed that women received equal rights immediately after the Revolutionary War; because it was fought for freedom, women's rights must have followed close on its heels. And after listening to a

book about the life of George Washington and participating in a discussion of his ownership of slaves, Brandon explained (in an interview several weeks later) that Washington "first stated that there shouldn't be slaves." Again, he had not remembered a story so complicated as to involve a person fighting for the "freedom" of his country while at the same time owning slaves.

## Discussion

Barthes (1977) characterizes narrative as being "without noise"—every element in a narrative, that is, functions as a significant component of the overall story. Of course, not every story follows so tightly structured a format, but cognitive research indicates that people use an idealized mental *story grammar*—consisting of setting, protagonist, and goal-directed behavior, for example—in understanding and recalling narratives. Both children and adults are more likely to remember stories that conform to such an ideal structure, they better remember elements that have a central (especially causal) significance in a story, and they restructure information when retelling stories in order to make it conform more closely to an ideal structure (reviewed in Mandler, 1982, and Olson & Gee, 1988; on conflicting perspectives on the essential constituents of a story, see Stein & PolICASTRO, 1984).

The findings of this study closely match those of research on the comprehension and recall of fictional narratives. First, several studies indicate that after hearing or reading a story, people are more likely to remember those events that are causally connected than those that simply occur in a temporal sequence (Black & Bower, 1980; Omanson, 1982a, 1982b; Thorndyke, 1977; Trabasso & Sperry, 1985). Indeed, the more causal connections an element of a story has with other elements, the more likely people are to recall it (Trabasso, Secco, & VanDenBroek, 1984). Such findings are hardly surprising, for the very purpose of a story is not to list a random collection of temporally ordered events but to reveal a sequence of actions whose causal connections the reader (or listener) considers meaningful.

The students in these classrooms clearly used this same narrative approach in understanding the past, imputing a rational basis to all historical developments and describing historical changes as part of an orderly sequence. Technological changes were particularly easy for them to understand, for they could point to purely rational processes such as "coming up with new ideas" and "people getting smarter." Moreover, they used the same approach to explain changes in beliefs, attitudes, and social relations: They thought that women and minorities are treated better today because "we figured it out," and that no one believes in witches or volcano goddesses because they have been "proven" not to exist. When considering changes in fashion—an area in which it is harder to maintain that changes are rational—students sometimes were willing to concede that things may change just because people get tired of doing things the same way, but nonetheless they often imposed a rational basis to those changes.



A second finding of research on narrative comprehension and recall is that people better remember stories that conform to an ideal plot structure (Brennan, Bridge, & Winograd, 1986; Mandler, 1982; Stein & Nezworski, 1978; Thorndyke, 1977). When the events in a story fail to conform to such a structure, people frequently recount them in the ideal order rather than the order in which they actually heard or read them (Black & Bower, 1980; Mandler, 1978, 1982; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Stein & Nezworski, 1978). In addition, people are more likely to remember content that is central to the main plot of a story than that which could be deleted or is more peripheral; sequences of events that lead to dead-ends are particularly likely to be forgotten (Black & Bower, 1980; Mandler, 1982; Omandson, 1982a, 1982b; Thorndyke, 1977; Trabasso & Sperry, 1985).

With few exceptions, these students also thought of historical change as having a kind of ideal plot—they saw change not as a random, ambiguous, or cyclical process, but as being characterized by straightforward, linear, and generally beneficial progress. Students were so convinced that life has improved over time that they interpreted the evidence they encountered in a way that fit their understanding. Even when not casting historical developments in such explicitly beneficial terms, students saw the process of change as one which went in a single dominant direction; as a result, they often sequenced historical information in an “ideal” order, rather than in the more complicated combinations that actually occurred in the past. Such sequencing is consistent with findings from research with a similar interview task (Barton & Levstik, 1996), in which students from first through sixth grade arranged pictures in this kind of uniform sequence and gave explanations nearly identical to those of students in the present study.

Finally, researchers since Bartlett (1932) have found that both children and adults retell stories in a simplified form. Mandler (1978), for example, found that when people were asked to recall a story with two separate episodes, they frequently retold it either by making a single character the protagonist for both stories or by creating a single episode out of material from both. And as already noted, people are less likely to recall irrelevant or optional information than that which is central to a story (Mandler, 1982; Omandson, 1982a, 1982b; Thorndyke, 1977). This selective remembering is also prominent in societies in which some or all historical information relies on oral transmission: the past often is recounted as a set of major episodic transformations rather than a series of gradual changes involving many people. As a result, the achievements of several different rulers are credited to a single individual, later events are remembered as having happened around a time of origin, several centuries are collapsed into the span of a few generations, and events in the middle tend to be eclipsed by those at the more remote and more recent end of the spectrum of time. And just as people tend to forget irrelevant or optional details when retelling narratives, oral traditions are particularly likely to omit those rulers who are no longer necessary to validate the contemporary social structure, such

as those whose lineages became “dead ends” (Henige, 1974; Jones, 1965; Ki-Zerbo, 1969; Miller, 1980).

Students in this study demonstrated the same kind of selective perception of the past: They thought of history as involving a very limited set of people and events, and they collapsed lengthy and complicated historical processes into short time frames and simple narratives. They thus often credited famous people with having single-handedly brought about monumental changes that actually came about over a much longer period of time. Brophy et al. (1992a, 1992b) found similar patterns in their interviews with fourth and fifth graders: Students in their studies described European explorers as though they were a small band of associates in close contact with each other, and they thought these explorers had returned to their home countries and personally led groups of settlers to the New World. Those students also conceived of the English colonies in North America as though they were all small villages similar to Plymouth Plantation.

### Instructional implications

The consistency of these narrative features of students' historical understanding—and their congruence with related research—indicate important considerations for the design of elementary instruction.<sup>3</sup> At the outset, it is critical to keep in mind just why these narrative simplifications are significant enough to demand attention. After all, some educators have extolled the virtues of presenting history as an engaging story (see, e.g., Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 1989; Crabtree, 1989; Craig, 1989), and Egan (1989) argues that narrative provides such a powerful force for understanding that it should form the principal basis for the elementary history curriculum. From such perspectives, students' tendency to think of history as though it were a story appears more a strength than a weakness—as some reviewers of this research have noted, “Settlers *did* come before cities!” and “Lincoln *did* free the slaves!” On closer analysis, though, it becomes clear that the narrative features of students' thinking constitute significant and misleading distortions that must be addressed explicitly in the design of elementary curricular and instructional programs in history.

Over the past several decades, historians and philosophers of history have debated extensively the role of narrative in historical accounts. While narrative is clearly a common form of historical explanation, a number of scholars have argued that narrative cannot be an accurate representation of past experience. Mink (1978), for example, maintains that history itself is not a narrative—that is, history “as-it-was-lived” did not follow the form of a story that historians later uncovered through their use of evidence. Rather, the narrative form is the creative artifice of the historian. Similarly, White (1978, 1984) argues that historical events are not part of a fixed narrative structure. Instead, they can be encoded into many different potential stories. By choosing one particular story



to tell about any set of events, the historian thus creates a verbal fiction; like Mink, White argues that the structures of such narratives are invented by the historian, rather than found in the historical evidence itself.

While many historians would not accept such an extreme version of the impositional nature of historical narratives, few would deny that the creation of particular narratives inevitably involves selection. In telling any story, the historian will leave out some facts because they have no perceived relevance and will attempt to establish the causal significance of those that are included (see, e.g., Danto, 1965; Gallie, 1964; White, 1965). Indeed, the evaluation of historical accounts revolves precisely around the extent to which this selectivity is justified: Given a historical narrative, the scholar will ask whether the relevant facts have been included and whether those included have the significance attributed to them. While any narrative account is a selective construction, some such constructions are more accurate or complete than others. The narrative features identified in this study, then, represent three important ways in which students' thinking is likely to fall short of the accuracy and completeness necessary for meaningful understanding.

First, imputing a rational basis to all change over time distorts history. Students saw technological changes as the result of "coming up with new ideas" or "solving problems." They also thought that styles and fashion change because materials improve, and that attitudes and beliefs change because they are proved wrong. But styles do not always change because of new materials or better ideas; such changes may come about because of changing tastes or because of broader social and economic trends. Technological developments, meanwhile, are more closely linked to the requirements of systems of production and distribution than to the uninhibited march of scientific progress. And perhaps most importantly, people today do not have different beliefs than in the past simply because older ones have been disproved. Fewer people now believe in witches because their worldview is different. While this change has been bound up with scientific discoveries and technological achievements, students' assumption that purely rational considerations ended the belief in witches imposes a secular worldview on people who did not share it. Thinking that women and minorities now have equal rights "because we figured it out," meanwhile, overlooks the relationships between attitudes and broader social, cultural, economic, and political forces, as well as the sustained efforts that have gone into (and continue to go into) changing earlier attitudes.

Students also distorted history by thinking of it in terms of uniform, linear progress (or sometimes decline). They thought that nearly every aspect of life has improved over time, and failed to perceive either the diversity of images that might characterize any given moment in history or the possibility that some historical developments may not have proceeded in a single direction. The past is much more diverse than their understanding implies: Settlers did not come before cities, because both settlement and urbanization have been features of human civilization for thousands of years. At any given moment in

time, people live in many different ways: Some are rich and others poor, some have power and others none, some live in the city and others in the country, and so on (and each of these contrasts represents a wide continuum rather than a simple set of opposites).

Failure to recognize this diversity compromises students' ability to understand the interactions of people with different experiences. How could they understand the relationship between owners and workers, or between urban residents and farmers, when they think that everyone was doing the same thing at any given time? In addition, history rarely exemplifies the simplistic kinds of progress or decline students perceived: Unlike well-structured narratives, history includes dead ends, as well as developments that follow no uniform pattern. Political participation, gender roles, and race relations, for example, may have improved (in most people's perspective) over time, but they have not exhibited the simple and straightforward progress that a linear view of history implies. While an image of progress is reassuring, it hardly squares with the historical record.

Finally, students significantly distorted history when they simplified it into a narrative of limited proportions. Their understanding of the past included only a few essential characters and events, which they collapsed into a minimal spatial and temporal expanse and credited with having brought about monumental changes. Although misconceptions about the number of people involved in wars seem almost cute—and presumably easily corrected—students' simplification of complicated and long-term processes is a more significant narrative distortion. The American Revolution may have been fought for a kind of freedom, for example, but it had little impact on the lives of women, minorities, or the poor; failing to recognize that freedom and rights were not immediately extended to these segments of the U.S. population is an important misunderstanding. Similarly, neither Lincoln nor King brought about equality for African Americans; the still-incomplete history of race relations includes, at the very minimum, the millions of people involved in slavery, abolitionism, the Civil War, Reconstruction, segregation, and the civil rights movement. Thinking that Martin Luther King made a speech that changed everyone's mind is highly misleading.

Yet this study in no way suggests that these distorting features of students' thinking are inevitable or irreversible. Indeed, students in Amy's and Tina's classes often displayed their ability to overcome these limitations, even if only temporarily or in narrow circumstances. Instruction, then, should be able to address students' narrative misconceptions. First, to counter students' assumption that all historical change has occurred for purely rational reasons, teachers should explicitly call attention to the reasons for change over time, and should emphasize the connections between changes in different aspects of society—the ways that economic systems lead to particular inventions or patterns of distribution, or the social and technological effects of warfare, or the political consequences of social movements. In addition, teachers need to give students the

opportunity to examine the ways in which the worldview of people in the past differed from their own. By seeing that people made choices consistent with their own values and conceptions of society, students should be less likely to assume that they simply hadn't "figured it out yet." Finally, instruction must focus on the actual process by which change comes about. Becoming familiar with the abolitionist, anti-lynching, and civil rights movements (and the resistance each encountered), for example, should disabuse students of the notion that either Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King single-handedly enlightened society and ended slavery or racial discrimination.

To counter students' perception of a uniform and linear pattern of historical change, it is imperative that instruction focus on the diversity of experience that characterizes a given time period. Students need to learn that at any one time, people live in a wide range of geographic settings, have a wide range of economic and occupational circumstances, and are subject to a wide range of social expectations. Whether studying ancient Egypt, colonial America, or the 1960s, for example, students should constantly be comparing the experience of men and women, urban and rural residents, and upper, middle, and lower socioeconomic classes. Moreover, students should learn about the relationships among these groups, so that they see historical societies as consisting of many connected groups rather than as idealized stereotypes of explorers, settlers, and so on. Their perception of constant progress throughout history, meanwhile, needs to be addressed by considering both advances and setbacks; for example, examining the highly uneven development of women's participation in public life in the United States (as when factory workers were expected to return to life as homemakers after World War II) would contradict the perception of steadily expanding opportunities.

Finally, students' limited perception of the expanse of history could be addressed by devoting attention to gradual and long-term social, economic, and political changes, rather than to famous people and dramatic events. By studying the history of race relations in the United States (instead of the life of Martin Luther King or the Emancipation Proclamation in isolation), or studying the development of the concept of freedom (instead of the isolated study of the American Revolution or the U.S. Constitution), students should become better able to assign people and events a meaningful place in historical time. This would be a dramatic change from current patterns of instruction, which often focus on heroes and wars—precisely the elements of history that students are most likely to overemphasize in their thinking. Focusing on long-term trends in society might also expand students' understanding of the spatial expanse of history by making it clear that not everyone at a given time was intimately bound up with the major events and figures of the day. Similarly, a teacher might choose historical fiction that illustrates daily life for average people rather than just stories about famous people.

Simply changing the content of the curriculum, however, will not overcome students' misconceptions. Research on conceptual change teaching in science

indicates that students' ideas are remarkably resilient and unlikely to change just because the teacher provides a scientifically acceptable explanation. To bring about a genuine change in understanding, the teacher first needs to prod students to become dissatisfied with their current conceptions (Hewson & Hewson, 1988; Nussbaum & Novick, 1982; Posner, Strike, Hewson, & Gertlog, 1982). Creating this kind of conceptual conflict demands that students encounter situations that directly contradict their preexisting ideas—heavy objects floating, chalk and lead falling at the same speed, and so on. While students cannot conduct experiments in history the way they can in science, teachers can nonetheless provide them with the kinds of direct experiences that will challenge their misconceptions. Widely diverse pictures, artifacts, or written sources from the same time period, for example, can force students to come to grips with their assumption of uniformity; the students in this study who were confronted with a picture of a colonial mansion were visibly shaken by its discontinuity with their perception that all people in the Colonial Era lived in log cabins. Similarly, students who read conflicting but equally "rational" arguments about issues (the American Revolution, for example), or who see widespread resistance to change (as with the civil rights movement) may be less likely to believe that change came about because "we figured it out."

But even such conceptual conflict will be insufficient to change students' ideas if history remains an isolated topic of study at school, a subject lacking in purpose or meaning. Educators concerned with conceptual change in science emphasize that students' ideas are not isolated theories but part of a broader conceptual ecology, a set of understandings that derive from their assumptions about how knowledge is created and used. If students do not see school knowledge as "real," then conflicts are unlikely to have much meaning for them and may be either assimilated to their prior conceptions or compartmentalized as "school knowledge" (Dreyfus, Jungwirth, & Elivovitch, 1990; Duschl & Gitomer, 1991; Strike & Posner, 1992). In order for students to care enough about subject matter for them actually to change their ideas, they must be involved in investigating meaningful questions and thoughtfully considering their implications; their studies must take place in a context in which both the conflicts and the solutions are meaningful (Dreyfus et al., 1990; Duschl & Gitomer, 1991).

In history, then, students need to conduct their own authentic historical investigations—focusing on questions that matter to them and using sources with which they are familiar (cf. Seixas, 1993a). Students' family and social backgrounds clearly influence their understanding of the nature and purpose of history (Barton, 1995; Levstik & Barton, 1996; Seixas, 1993b), and this conceptual ecology must be considered as carefully in history as in science. The present study indicates that students were most likely to move beyond their narrative misconceptions when they had access to relevant evidence from their own experience; the student from a rural area, for example, knew that some people still hunt. Others knew that movies might look different depending on who made them or that Italian food might have been eaten in Italy before in

America. Bringing about conceptual change will require students to examine historical evidence in situations in which both the conceptual conflicts and their solutions make sense to them; a student who investigates the way his grandmother faced constricted opportunities after World War II, for example, is more likely to regard historical unevenness as plausible than one who simply learns about it from a teacher or textbook. As in other curricular areas, meaningful investigation in authentic situations is a key to understanding.

## Conclusions

This study has identified three important ways in which elementary students simplified the historical information they encountered. They thought of change as having come about for logical reasons, as having taken place in an orderly sequence, and as being spatially and temporally limited in scope. These narrative features led to significant omissions, distortions, or misconceptions in students' thinking, and instruction should be designed to address each. In particular, students should learn about the reasons for historical changes, be exposed to diversity in history, and become acquainted with broad historical patterns and processes. In addition, instruction should provide students with direct exposure to historical information—visual images and various kinds of primary sources, for example—necessary to bring about conceptual conflicts. Finally, in order to produce genuine change in students' thinking, history instruction should take place in a context of authentic activities in which students directly investigate meaningful historical questions.

## Notes

1. The research methods for this study are described in Ch. 8 of this volume. Students' writing provided less insight into their thinking than either interviews or classroom participation. These compositions were based on the content they had begun learning while I was present, but the writing and revising usually took place after I produced them. In addition, many compositions went into portfolios, were sent home, or (in the case of first drafts) were relegated to the trash can before I saw them. Compositions nonetheless provided a source of triangulation for other data, since students' writing did not reveal patterns inconsistent with those identified from interviews or classroom participation. Greater use of written assignments in future research would require a systematic method of collection and analysis that would not interfere with the instructional needs of teachers and students.
2. In transcribing interviews, I have tried to capture as completely as possible the content and form of the original conversations. I have marked the deletion of words or phrases within a student's response with a bracketed ellipsis ([...]). Completed responses by students end with a period, while those that were interrupted by another student or myself have no period at the end.
3. In considering the implications of the present study, it is important to keep in mind both the small number of classrooms involved and the essentially descriptive nature of the findings. The primary purpose of this analysis is to describe recurring features

of students' thinking, not to explain how those features arose. It is difficult to determine just how much students' perceptions reflect their educational experiences—in and out of school—and how much they may reflect more basic kinds of cognitive patterning. It would be important to know, for example, the extent to which their perceptions were influenced by the larger sociocultural context, such as how much influence popular culture and the media had on their understanding of history as a narrative. Also, although these students came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, their race, ethnicity, and geographic origins were fairly similar. Future research might productively investigate the extent to which students with more diverse experiences interpret historical events differently. Finally, although this study included both fourth and fifth graders, I was unable to analyze the extent to which there may have been systematic differences correlated with age. Future research might examine the way narrative understanding is manifested across a range of grade levels.

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## "I just kinda know" Elementary students' ideas about historical evidence

Keith C. Barton

The use of evidence to reach supportable conclusions is one of the most important objectives of the social studies—or, indeed, of most disciplines. Throughout the past century, educators have pointed to the collection, evaluation, and systematic use of evidence as a critical feature of instruction in the field. Dewey's well-known dictum that reflective thought involves "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it" (1910, p. 6) has been echoed by scholars such as Kilpatrick (1925), Wesley (1937), Bode (1940), Hunt and Metcalfe (1957), Massialas and Cox (1966), and Beyer (1971). More recently, national curriculum standards for social studies point to the role of data collection and analysis in helping students make informed decisions (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994).

History educators frequently demonstrate particular sensitivity to such issues. The Bradley Commission on History in Schools (1988), for example, noted that history instruction should emphasize critical judgment in the use of evidence, and the National Council for History Standards required that national standards "reflect the principle of sound historical reasoning—careful evaluation of evidence" (National History Standards Project, 1994, p. 3). This concern is well placed, for it is evidence that separates historical knowledge from myths, legends, and fairy tales; stories about Columbus proving the world is round or Betsy Ross sewing the first flag are lacking in credibility precisely because there is no evidence to support them (and considerable evidence to the contrary). Without evidence, stories about the past rapidly deteriorate into various forms of "fanciful elaboration" (VanSledright and Brophy, 1992).

### Research on students' use of evidence

Despite its avowed importance to social studies education, the use of evidence has until recently received little attention by researchers in the United States. The only indexed entry for the topic in the *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Teaching and Learning* (Shaver, 1991) refers to the use of evidence by researchers