

Chapter 15

Articulating the Silences
*Teachers' and Adolescents' Conceptions of
 Historical Significance*

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At the level of mythology, emancipation—from kings, lords, tyrants, slavery, caste, tribes, superstition, poverty, patriarchy, even heterosexuality—is the very essence of “America.” . . . America has held out the promise of a freedom greater than any [immigrants] had known before. But . . . becoming American cannot be understood in “emancipationist” terms alone, for immigrants invariably encountered structures of class, race, gender, and national power that constrained, and sometimes defeated, their efforts to be free. Coercion, as much as liberty, has been intrinsic to our history and to the process of becoming American.

—Gary Gerstle¹

Ideas of historical significance are cultural constructs transmitted to members of a society in a variety of ways.² This is especially the case for national history. In an era of fragile nation-states, it is instructive to watch the ways in which, in the hands of nationalists, history becomes the “raw material to be recycled to produce daily myths . . . an enemy that must be dealt with in a radical, bloody way.”³ Even in countries that aspire to a more democratic and civic rather than ethnic principle of nationality, decisions about what is historically significant have as much to do with what is repressed as with what is recollected.⁴ As Gerstle notes,

“nationalism demands that boundaries against outsiders be drawn, that a dominant national culture be created or reinvigorated, and that internal and external opponents of the national project be subdued, nationalized, vanquished, and even excluded or repelled.”⁵ Even under the most repressive forms of nationalism, however, alternative histories develop beneath the surface and on the margins of official history. In a multicultural democracy such as the United States, alternative histories also develop, but they are more overtly disseminated through family and cultural and religious associations as well as through such public channels as museums and print and visual media. Because of the potential disparity between the version of history encountered in these contexts and that disseminated in school—a site where some form of overarching national history is explicitly introduced—students in multicultural societies may be faced with reconciling widely varied accounts of the past. In Hollinger’s view, such nations should aspire to a history “‘thick’ enough to sustain collective action yet ‘thin’ enough to provide room for the cultures of a variety of descent groups.”⁶ Individuals develop and express group identities but also take part in “an ongoing collective debate about the character and direction of the nation.”⁷ Thus, according to Hollinger, teaching and learning national history should include study of the different systems of ethnoracial classification used in the nation, including consideration of the various constituencies empowered or disempowered by these classifications. This approach to studying history, Hollinger argues, would demystify ethnoracial categories and “challenge the authority that [U.S.] society has traditionally allowed skin color and the shape of the face to exercise over culture.”⁸

There is little evidence that U.S. teachers (or any substantial part of the American public) are prepared to help students participate in the type of debate described by Hollinger.⁹ Indeed, the ways in which knowledge is created, transmitted, distorted, politicized, and used for specific purposes is rarely made evident in teacher training programs.¹⁰ Without such challenges to the status quo, prospective teachers may uncritically accept existing curriculum content as well as the social arrangements reflected in and supported by that content. Students, in turn, are unlikely to expect different ways of teaching or demonstrate different patterns of learning history if they have never seen them modeled.¹¹ Indeed, in several studies, students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds experienced difficulty fitting their own perspectives on historical significance with those presented in the school curriculum.¹² Some stood in active resistance to

what they encountered in school, drawing instead on forms of history presented in what they perceived as more culturally relevant sites, such as neighborhoods and families.

Students', Teachers', and Teacher Candidates' Views of Historical Significance

Developing a history that can sustain collective action while embracing the cultures of a variety of descent groups is more than a theoretical nicety; it is a practical necessity. Whether in workplaces or schools, Americans are linked to the world in complex and interesting ways, not least of which is through an influx of immigration that rivals numbers at the turn of the century.¹³ Meanwhile, the teaching force remains largely white, with relatively little experience teaching about diverse ethnoracial groups.¹⁴

In this chapter I consider the implications of this disparity between who American students are—and will be in the near future—and who their teachers understand Americans to be in the context of national history. I will focus on the results of two studies: first, an investigation of early adolescents' understanding of historical significance and, second, a similar study with teachers and teacher candidates. In the first study, in open-ended interviews, forty-eight students in grades 5 through 8 were presented with a set of captioned historical pictures and asked to choose the ones important enough to include on a timeline of the past five hundred years and to explain their choices (see Appendix).¹⁵ In the second study, twenty teacher candidates (preservice teachers at the beginning of their social studies methods course) and twelve teachers (inservice teachers with one or more years of experience) were asked to complete the same task with a nearly identical set of captioned historical pictures (see Appendix).¹⁶

Both studies used semistructured interviews and included a task that required participants to choose from among a set of twenty (for students) or twenty-five (for teachers and teacher candidates) captioned historical pictures and to respond to a set of broader questions and probes designed to explore their understanding of historical significance.¹⁷ In the teacher and teacher candidate interviews, groups worked simultaneously, though separately.¹⁸ The teachers and teacher candidates also worked with five pictures that were not used in the student study. These were selected to better represent the diversity of the U.S. historical experi-

ence as well as the "rights" issues that were prominent in student discussions of historical significance.

After interviewing participants and identifying a set of thematic strands in their responses, we subjected the interview transcripts to a systematic content analysis; coding included a systematic search for negative or discrepant evidence. The coded data were then analyzed using cross-case analysis (grouping the answers of students responding to the same items in the selection task and interview) and constant comparison (comparing students' responses across different portions of the task and interview). This resulted in a set of descriptive generalizations that forms the basis for this chapter.

In both studies, participants' choices focused primarily on the origin and development of the political and social structure of the United States, and the explanations pointed to steadily expanding rights and opportunities as the central theme in American history. At the same time, students had difficulty incorporating some historical patterns and events into their image of progress, and their discussion of these issues indicated a familiarity with a "vernacular" view of history separate from "official" views that justify the contemporary social structure.¹⁹ Teachers and teacher candidates, on the other hand, rarely focused on any form of vernacular history. Instead, most of the adult participants explicitly selected pictures that showed a positive image of nation-building, identifying their selections as "the main story," "what formed us," what made America "our family," what "made us a world power."

First Person Plural

The first person plural came naturally to these students, teachers, and teacher candidates as they talked about an American past. "We" fought the revolution, "we" discovered a cure for polio, "we" pushed the Taino, the Cherokee, or the Nez Perce off their land. From the respondents' perspective, historical events took on significance when they "formed us," "changed us," or "made us a nation." At first, this seems barely worth noting; after all, almost all of the student respondents and all but one of the adult respondents were American citizens, and they *were* sorting through images of U.S. history. But pronouns are shape-shifters, and it is useful to pay attention, particularly when antecedents shift around. Who are "we," and what is "ours"?

Regardless of their own ethnic background, their gender, or the recency of their families' immigration to the United States, students, teachers, and teacher candidates consistently used the pronouns "we" and "our" in talking about the events related to the settlement and creation of the United States. Their explanations suggest that they considered these events important because they defined a collective community. Beginning with a Thanksgiving picture that showed "the start of the United States, when we all became possible, because we all came from over there, and a bunch of immigrants came over here, and that's basically how we started our nation," students depicted the United States as a nation of immigrants. Teachers and teacher candidates also described immigration as one of the most distinctive aspects of American history. "This is why we got America. Why we are here," explained Celia, a teacher candidate. "This is where a large chunk of us are from, and this is like the basis for a lot of our cities, our development, our society." Her classmate Parker agreed: "When you think about it, we're all immigrants." Geri, a veteran teacher, said that the picture of immigrants was "*our family*."

Along with immigration, the Bill of Rights and the American Revolution elicited comments from adults about the establishment of "our country," "our fundamental rights," and "guidelines for working together." This emphasis on the origins of the United States—both its settlement and its creation as a political unit—reflects the importance of the past in defining a community of identification. While previous research indicates that children's understanding of the colonial period and the American Revolution is often vague and riddled with misconceptions, students had internalized one element that contemporary society considers important—that this is where "we" began.²⁰ Additionally, students and adults identified immigration as a key component in establishing the boundaries of national identity. For most of these students and adults, their community began with European settlement and expanded over time to include an unspecified array of European immigrants. Students and adults distinguished their historical community from that of Native Americans, explaining that "we"—European settlers—pushed "them"—the original inhabitants of the Americas—off "their" land.²¹ As one teacher candidate explained, the exploration of the Americas was "a white man's event . . . it doesn't include any African Americans, any Indians because we were pushing Indians off their land . . . and the African Americans [pictured among the explorers] were probably [the Europeans'] slaves."

Just as consistently, students and adults distinguished between "us"—those historically possessing rights and freedoms—and "them"—those historically disenfranchised or discriminated against on the basis of ethnoracial categories or gender. Thus, at Thanksgiving "it was kind of like the beginning of us becoming friends," said one student. "We was making a bond with Native Americans; that's good because that's a tradition that goes on forever." In similar terms, another student noted that the civil rights movement was important because it gave African Americans "a lot of opportunity to get jobs and stuff because [before] they weren't really recognized as people." Similarly, Ryan explained that the civil rights movement was important "because African Americans were not treated equally." His interview partner, Juan, agreed that "they need just as much rights as we do." Students also recognized that there were problems in uniting historically segregated people. As Lincoln explained, "although [African Americans] got to be free we still kinda pushed 'em . . . we still gave them the cheap neighborhoods so they didn't live with us. . . . Kind of like the Indians . . . and the voting thing for women." Byron nodded, adding, "We said hey, they're here, pfft," gesturing as if brushing them out of the way. Teacher candidates (but no teachers) also used an us-and-them dichotomy in discussing the significance of civil rights. Without civil rights, several said, "They [African Americans] would still be slaves"—just as earlier they had said that without the American Revolution "we would be ruled by England."²²

Veteran teachers spent considerably less time discussing civil rights than did either of the other two groups. They almost unanimously placed civil rights on the timeline, sometimes distinguishing between "our overall rights," guaranteed in the Bill of Rights but not extended to all of "them," and civil rights and women's rights that had to be wrested from a resistant society, generally identified as "us." Once gender was raised as an issue, however, students shifted from generic identification with European Americans to identification by gender. In the case of women's suffrage, girls identified with women in the early twentieth century, explaining that "we [females] came along . . . and got the vote." Boys, on the other hand, identified with the men from the period, arguing that "we [males] already had the vote."²³ This pattern was not as prominent among the adults, most of whom were women. While some adults strongly identified with women in the women's movement, others were just as adamant in not doing so.

The emphasis by students, teachers and teacher candidates on the expansion of rights and opportunities and the steady improvement of social relations indicates concern with establishing the United States as a country in which historic hardships and injustices are corrected and overcome. This should not be surprising. In societies in which contemporary groups experience wide differences in their economic or social status, emancipatory historical stories serve to establish the legitimacy of the status quo and dissipate concern about the persistence of disparities in circumstance.²⁴ But, as Gerstle notes in the opening quote, “becoming American cannot be understood in ‘emancipationist’ terms alone. . . . Coercion, as much as liberty, has been intrinsic to our history and to the process of becoming American.”²⁵

Ignoring the complexity of the American experience may serve to maintain existing economic and social structures, but it certainly confuses students and teachers about a good deal of American history. When the history curriculum “emphasizes the obvious, cheerful, and stereotypical,” students and teachers are deprived of an important mechanism whereby they might understand their own lives as having historical context(s), and they are given no help in understanding the continuation of inequities and injustice in their (or others’) society.²⁶ Instead, they are faced with a history long on myth, short on intellectual rigor, and extraordinarily slow to incorporate the wide range of behavior that has characterized American history.

Challenging the Obvious, Cheerful, and Stereotypical

Some participants—particularly among the adolescent students—were aware of and sometimes disturbed by anomalies in the historical record. For European American students, the continuation of racism was one such puzzle. African Americans “have rights,” Rhiannon said, pondering the problem; Sonja agreed but noted that “we still have prejudice.” “Yeah,” Rhiannon acknowledged, “there’s still prejudice . . . and there are even like other religious groups and other different countries that . . . have prejudice, too. Even if everybody has the right, doesn’t change people’s emotions.” She and Sonja continued to turn the idea around, suggesting that recent immigrants seemed to be treated most badly. Rhiannon said, “Illegal—not illegal, but aliens—that have just come here like Puerto Ricans and Mexicans . . . they came here but they’re legally allowed to be

here, but people think they’re like taking our taxes and taking all our government stuff that would go to them.” Another group of girls also mentioned hostility towards recent immigrants, noting that California was involved in “making laws” about immigration. As they discussed this disjuncture between progress and prejudice, Rachel mentioned that “people think of America as the land of opportunities but I don’t think they think of racism.” Saara also pointed out that “[s]ome places are going back to segregation. I think it’s sad. It took such a long time to get it the way it is now.” Rachel nodded and commented, “It’s not perfect, not where we want to be.”

African American students framed the past as a story of learning from mistakes, as had European American students, but they sometimes introduced a more complex analysis of progress in extending rights to marginalized people. They, too, argued that the Bill of Rights was, as Isabella said, “only for rich white men who could vote and you had to pay taxes . . . so the Bill of Rights just protected wealthy, white, male landowners, but that [civil rights] applied to everyone and gave everyone a chance.” They also mentioned the lack of attention to civil rights in school. “You don’t really learn about [civil rights] in school,” Isabella commented. “You know I’ve read books about it. My parents have books and I’ve gone to the library and I’ve seen movies and stuff and I mean at this school and at my other school I didn’t learn too much about it ’cause like you celebrate Martin Luther King but you don’t hear about it . . . you just hear that he helped.”

Sometimes, too, when a European American student argued that “we’re all equal now,” a student of color would drop out of the conversation, at least temporarily. In one instance, Robert, a European American, remarked that one of the results of racism was that “most black people are poor and on free or reduced lunches like 93 percent or so.” Derek, his African American classmate, looked at him in surprise, pointing a finger at his own chest and shaking his head. He stayed silent, however, until the conversation shifted to Native Americans. When Robert said that Columbus discovered America, Derek leaned forward and asked, “How did *he* discover America? There were already people here!” Oliver, a European American, intervened, saying “they didn’t know where the U.S. was; since they didn’t know it, it was a discovery [for them], but not for the Indians.” Again, Derek withdrew, shaking his head in disagreement. Similarly, when the eighth-grade girls discussed recent immigration from “Puerto Rico and Mexico,” Patricia, whose father was Mexican American,

remained silent during the discussion of legal and illegal immigration, re-entering the conversation at a later point to discuss ethnic contributions—food—to American culture. In contrast, her classmate Saara, an immigrant from Poland, intervened forcefully when Rhiannon joked that Saara was an “illegal alien.” Saara declared that she was legal and had a green card—“actually, a *pink green card*.”

Teachers and teacher candidates spent much less time discussing the continuation of racism. Instead, they stressed the continued need for inclusion, folding racism and ethnicity into one “issue of culture” where “we still have problems.” One teacher candidate, Jerrie, suggested that these problems were so crucial that her group should focus on “a social perspective, *like what made things better*” (emphasis mine). Another group of teachers discussed continuing discrimination against immigrants, and a third group argued about whether to include the Depression picture because “it was at this time that we established all the social programs . . . all the things we’re trying to change now.” This last group of teachers also kept the immigration picture on the timeline because, Bonnie explained, “you wouldn’t get to civil rights without that.” While the adults’ brief attention to ethnoracial history stands in contrast to the students’ lengthier discussion of racism and discrimination, the topic arose most often among students in schools with the greatest degree of ethnoracial diversity.²⁷ Similarly, adults who worked in more diverse school settings were more likely to address race as an issue separate from ethnicity.

Just as ethnoracial history provoked discussion among participants in the study, so did the Vietnam War. For students, Vietnam raised question about American exceptionalism. They thought that Americans were different in that they did not fight wars of aggression, and fought only to “help people . . . we were fighting . . . for other people.” They could not reconcile what they knew about Vietnam with this view. They weren’t sure whom Americans were helping in Vietnam. Rhiannon struggled to explain with whom America was fighting. “The Vietnamese people,” she finally declared. When asked *which* Vietnamese people, she hesitated. “North or south?” she asked, laughing. Sonja volunteered that she thought “it was like a civil war between like Vietnam, I think.” Lewis speculated that the war “helped Vietnam be different. Well, it helped the north and south or something.” His classmate Peter shrugged and said, “I don’t really know much about the Vietnam War.” After listening to his peers struggle for awhile, Jared commented that “they’re trying to make excuses for a war we lost.”

Teachers and teacher candidates also had difficulty reconciling what they knew of Vietnam with their ideas about why Americans enter wars. While they were not as convinced as the students that Americans went to war solely for altruistic purposes, they did think that Americans were supposed to get something out of the war—access to oil or some other economic advantage, for instance. They were unsure what Americans intended to “get out of [Vietnam],” knowing only that “we lost that war.” Lisa, a teacher candidate, described the loss as “a change for the worse . . . it was being pushed out,” and compared the American experience to the way in which Native Americans were “pushed out of their land.” Younger teacher candidates said they didn’t know much about Vietnam, claiming they never studied it, either in precollegiate or collegiate history classes. Teachers and older teacher candidates evidenced some first and secondhand information about the war, usually gathered from having lived through the time period, or from family or acquaintances who served in Vietnam. This information did not help them understand why America was involved, only that the war precipitated protests at home and bad treatment for returning soldiers. Stacie, a teacher, said, “it may have been the longest war, but we weren’t even fighting for our country. I mean, I know it’s significant, but. . .” Celia nodded, saying, “See, I think, my Dad [a Vietnam veteran] would kill me, but I don’t think we should take it [on the timeline].” Mason agreed, arguing that “it certainly had an era of its own, but as far as forming who we are, I don’t know.”

In part, these ideas reflect the development of a wider public mythology “in which the U.S. government disappears as a devastating force, the Vietnamese people cease to be victims, and the principal focus of concern becomes psychic stress for those veterans who survived.”²⁸ This interpretation of the Vietnam era makes the antiwar movement especially confusing. Such protests challenged students’ and adults’ schema of cooperation and reconciliation. Why, they wondered, did people object to helping another country? Isabella, a student, wanted to know “how [the war] was started and why some of the best people were against it. I mean to me, I want to know why they were against the Vietnamese people.” Another student, Lincoln, offered the conclusion that “people were going mad.” Three students, Oliver, Jacob, and Robert, thought that more people died in Vietnam because “you have all these shootings because people in the U.S. were arguing over something,” but they were unclear as to what the argument was about. They had no inkling that

war resistance was a regular feature of America's history; so far as they knew, Vietnam was a singular incident of dissent.

Though students expressed interest in the Vietnam era, teachers and teacher candidates worried about including it on their timeline because "it was a negative thing." In one group of teacher candidates, discussion centered on when "negative things like protests" should be introduced. "You wouldn't talk about it in elementary school," Jana claimed. They also worried about discussing Vietnam because they connected anti-Vietnam protest to more general social unrest. As Tara, a teacher candidate, explained it, "the whole value system or beliefs changed in the country, maybe not as a direct result of the war, maybe just the times, but there was the sexual revolution." Others argued that, despite the social upheaval of the period, Vietnam didn't "form us." When Mason, a teacher, asked, "what did [the war] do?" his peers had difficulty formulating a response. "Well," Celine said, "it's a huge deal . . . a huge controversy on whether or not this was even an important thing at the time." Susan added that "it caused us to have dissent and we started to become critical of government." Celine frowned, adding, "Weren't we already critical in some ways?" "Not as overly," Susan explained.

In all the adult discussion of Vietnam, only Celine's remark indicated any awareness that protest or criticism of government might predate the Vietnam era. Yet her peers dismissed her reservations; they had a vague sense that something was different about the kind of protest and criticism leveled at the government during and after the Vietnam years, though they had trouble articulating that difference. Later in the discussion, for instance, Susan returned to the idea that Vietnam marked a critical turning point in how Americans viewed their government. Vietnam, she argued, represented "our conscience. Even though it was kind of a negative thing, I think it gave us a conscience." Her peers remained unconvinced. Vietnam had been "a problem at the time," not something with long-term consequences, and certainly not something that explained "who we are"—their bottom line for determining historical significance.

This tendency to see history as a series of separate and singular events showed up in several other discussions among teachers and teacher candidates. Only one adult, for instance, remarked that the United States had suffered economic depressions prior to 1929. Not unlike the students who treated the Depression as a one-time event when "everyone was

poor" and America "realized that they weren't the god of all countries," some adults saw the effects of the Depression as limited to a single generation. At most, they thought the experience of economic depression explained some of their parents' or grandparents' attitudes toward work and money, but they perceived little effect for subsequent generation of Americans. As Abby, a teacher candidate, noted, "the Depression [is] a big part of our *history*, but as far as how *we* are. . . ." She shrugged. Abby and her peers tended to describe history as a series of time-bound problems recognized, debated, and resolved (or just forgotten)—a depression in the 1930s, a civil rights movement in the 1960s, the invention of a technology or medical cure at a particular moment in time. When individuals did mention the long-term or world-wide effects of events or eras, they were greeted with surprise by some of their peers. In two groups of teacher candidates, for instance, a member of each group connected economic depression in the United States to current social welfare systems. Nila explained that "the Depression sets up all that stuff that FDR does, like welfare. Without all that, the welfare system as we know it wouldn't exist. Like we still have the TVA in 1998, you know, sixty years later." Moira raised her eyebrows, turned to Nila, and asked, "Were you some kind of history major?" "No," Nila responded. "I had a really good history teacher in high school." In another group of teacher candidates, Hanna argued that the Depression had "world-wide impact," but her peers disagreed, countering that its significance was confined to changing things "for our grandparents."

In other instances, adults relied on fragmentary or conflated pieces of historical information to argue for or against the significance of an event or era. Susan, a teacher, was probably conflating information about instances of women's suffrage prior to 1920 with early restrictions on male suffrage when she argued that the Nineteenth Amendment was not important because women could already vote. "See, women voted in the 1700s! It just was who owned land," she told her group. "So some men didn't vote, but some women could, it just depended on who owned land." Fragmentary information also led Bonnie, another teacher, to make law-like statements about historical cause-and-effect relationships. She recalled that World War II helped lift the United States out of economic depression and concluded that the Depression was significant because "war usually grows out of [depression] and produces prosperity."

The Code of Silence

When a student, Jaelyn, noted in regard to antiwar protests that “disagreement can lead to such a big conflict that could have been solved a lot easier,” she inadvertently characterized a basic tension in teaching and learning national history. As White characterizes it:

Even more important than transmitting public scholarly knowledge, elementary and secondary schools serve as institutions that enculturate the young of our nation with the core values, beliefs, and practices of the contemporary mainstream American culture. . . . Therefore, historical, geographic, economic, or political events that do not reflect the United States and its inhabitants at their finest hour, embodying the ideas for which we stand, tend to be ruthlessly edited out when “what is or was” meets the filter of “what should be.”²⁹

While students, teachers, and teacher candidates all ascribed significance to aspects of the past that promoted social unity and consensus, they did not all respond in the same ways to more divisive aspects of American history.³⁰ Instead, students expressed interest in exactly those aspects of the past that teachers and teacher candidates found profoundly disturbing. Given the adults’ desire to identify with and introduce children to a community at once stable and emancipatory, the coercive and divisive elements in national development presented teachers and teacher candidates with a dilemma. First, they worried that introducing “negative” history was developmentally inappropriate; perhaps children in elementary and middle school were not mature enough to handle an ambiguous past. Next, they suggested that these aspects of the past were aberrations rather than patterns in American history. Finally, not only did they argue that knowing about coercive and divisive parts of America’s past were not fundamental to the formation of children’s national identity; they suggested that such knowledge threatened to undermine that identity. In building these arguments, teachers and teacher candidates circumscribed a national identity that was inclusive but not plural, civic but rarely social. Thus, civil rights movements that sought to include more people in joint civic life with European Americans were significant, but instances of ethnoracial repression (Indian removal, Japanese internment) or resistance (Vietnam) or movements that challenged Americans to alter basic social or economic conditions (labor movements, economic depression) rarely were. As examples of coercion and resistance in nation-building

dropped off the adults’ timelines, there was silence at exactly the points where students expressed confusion about and interest in the past.

Safety in Silence

The teachers and teacher candidates in this study were not unaware of the dilemma presented by the contrast between their desire for a beneficent national history and students’ desire to know more about exactly those aspects of the past with which teachers felt most uncertain. They argued that their own experience as students of history had failed to prepare them to understand national history in sophisticated ways or to make sense out of the persistent problems of a diverse nation or an increasingly interdependent world. They said, for instance, that history “should be multicultural,” but they also wanted to look past differences and establish some sort of common identity. Several declared that they didn’t see color in their classrooms and couldn’t imagine discussing with their students how color was used to construct racial categories in the United States.³¹ They were aware that injustices had happened in the past but were terrified of what they might unleash by speaking about them in the present. In response, they chose silence. These silences in the history curriculum are reflections of silences in the larger culture—codes of politeness that constrain what adults think it is appropriate to discuss in public or with children, a desire to enculturate children into what teachers perceive as mainstream American culture.

As the products of schools that were often silent on cultural differences, these teachers extend the silence into their own classrooms. They avoid topics that make them uncomfortable or that they think will disturb their students.³² When faced with accommodating a more diverse student population, their tendency is to celebrate relatively minor, non-threatening differences—clothing, holidays, food—and avoid overt discussion of race, cultural conflict, social inequities, and oppression.³³ In so doing, they inadvertently present students with stereotypes and misrepresent past and current circumstances. Not surprisingly, individuals whose history is so often misrepresented in the curriculum are likely to reject history as meaningless, inaccurate, and irrelevant. In consequence, they are more likely to understand themselves and others in local and presentist terms.³⁴ Of course, we can always argue that what these students and teachers really need is more history. The students in this study

will get just that. They are embarked on a course of study that will provide them with perhaps the most concentrated attention to history in their schooling. Between fifth and eleventh grade they are likely to take at least five history courses.

The teachers and teacher candidates also took history at both precollegiate and collegiate levels.³⁵ They recalled that their history instructors introduced all of the topics pictured in the timeline task, with the exception of Vietnam. They expressed embarrassment and frustration over the gaps in their recollection. Despite their foggy memories for some parts of the past, however, they recalled the main point of the mainstream story—emancipation, progress, and exceptionality—even as they acknowledged its silences. In this they were much like the African American adults surveyed by Rosenzweig (this volume), who also perceived American history as a story of progress over time. A national story of progressive emancipation without attention to the coercive elements of nation building, however, fails to provide teachers or students with a framework for making sense out of much of history and leaves them vulnerable to myth and manipulation.³⁶ Engaging students in in-depth study of the coercive as well as emancipatory potential in the American experience, on the other hand, can be challenging for teachers. As I analyzed the comments of the teachers and teacher candidates engaged in the timeline task, three specific challenges emerged:

- *Narrow conceptions of American polity.* As the teachers discussed what was or was not historically significant, they built a dichotomous picture of American history. “Our” story focused on the construction of a European American polity that was a single culture in a multicultural world. While other cultural groups appeared at various points in the story, their activities were generally sidebars to the main events. Few of the teachers or teacher candidates knew enough about individuals and groups they perceived as “other” to discuss them in a sensitive, reasonably accurate way, even when they were sympathetic to their inclusion on the timeline. While they knew brief immigration and civil rights stories that emphasized the emancipatory pull of America, they knew almost nothing about the factors that pushed people to emigrate or about the varied circumstances that constrained their participation in American society. As Gerstle notes, a nation is itself a structure of power that, like class, gender, and race, limits the array of options available to its citizens.³⁷ With no information about the ways in which national power is brought to bear in the process of nation building, teachers have little

hope of helping students analyze either emancipation or coercion in the making of Americans.

Changing this requires more than increasing the required doses of national history. Rather, it suggests that historical study might benefit from anthropological perspective that would encourage teachers “to reflect on cultural variation . . . combat . . . ethnocentrism . . . and see other people’s points of view more clearly.”³⁸ Focusing on questions about human actions and thoughts in a range of “strange” settings might also “expose taken for granted substantive values to scrutiny,” while raising a new set of questions to frame national history: What constituencies have various social, political, and economic systems apparently served? To what uses have these systems been put by various empowered and disempowered agents? Which ethnoracial categories have been introduced when and by whom, and who, if anyone, resisted their application and in what context? To concentrate on telling such a story could demystify and historicize the categories, without denying their ordinance, for good or ill, over specific people at specific times and places.³⁹

- *Little experience with historical inquiry.* Shifting history instruction from the transmission of cultural verities to their investigation highlights another problem. Neither teachers nor students report experience with historical inquiry.⁴⁰ As a result, both need *different*, not necessarily *more*, history—history that engages them in inquiry into the kinds of questions suggested earlier.⁴¹ Perhaps collegiate level history classes could more systematically involve students in such inquiry (see, for example, McDiarmid, this volume). In turn, methods courses and professional development activities could focus on developing forms of historical inquiry appropriate for K–12 students.⁴²

- *Fear of repercussions from administrators and public.* There is a wonderful scene in the movie *Lonestar* in which contending community delegations meet with two social studies teachers to discuss their approach to Texas history. When one of the teachers says that she is simply trying to show her students the complex ways in which different individuals and groups came together in Texas, a parent retorts that she doesn’t want complexities for her child and suggests that the teachers stick to food and celebrations. When I show that scene to my graduate classes, it always elicits a groan. It is exactly what they are afraid of—irate parents who want a sanitized version of history and will fight to keep it. The teachers and teacher candidates in this study share that anxiety. They want to smooth over differences, not hold them up for examination.

Not surprisingly, they prefer that parents support rather than attack their programs. Traditionally, Americans have looked to history to provide a justification for the current way of things, and they are likely to resist instruction that questions the foundations of the status quo. Teachers, then, need to learn how to garner support for change and how to respond to challenges.⁴³ It is not enough to educate students for democratic citizenship; teachers, too must learn to take part in meaningful and productive discussion with people of diverse viewpoints.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The ways in which the students, teachers, and teacher candidates in these two studies talked about history and historical significance in relation to national history are both encouraging and frustrating. While both groups expressed faith in the mainstream American story of gradual emancipation and progress, students were more likely to maintain an alternative story in which private prejudices and, sometimes, public policy worked against inclusion and thwarted what they perceived as the promise of the Bill of Rights. Teachers and teacher candidates, on the other hand, often rejected “negative” images as having little to do with the formation of national identity, especially as it applied to children and adolescents. Their reluctance to include divisive or coercive—or simply alternative—elements from the past contrasted sharply with students’ interest in those areas.

Of course, once these historical topics enter the curriculum, they, too, may be sanitized and lose their appeal to students. While this is possible—even probable—it is not necessary. If race, dissent, gender, and class become questions for inquiry rather than topics for study, perhaps they can maintain their power for students.⁴⁵ To this end, teachers’ notions of freedom, expanding rights, and the dangers of conflict, as well as their ideas about discrimination and oppression, need to be examined, “drawn on and pushed against . . . [so that] the history usually reserved for the few . . . is the history that . . . belong[s] to all.”⁴⁶ Then the challenge for teachers will be to help children build a framework for making critical sense out of legitimating stories as well as alternative, vernacular histories (see Lee and Ashby, this volume). Lacking such a framework, students may simply replace nationalist self-satisfaction with cynicism.⁴⁷ Neither prepares students to understand national history. Indeed, not only are

both likely to leave students uninterested in history, but they are probably equally likely to lead students away from active civic participation.

NOTES

1. Gary Gerstle, “Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans,” *Journal of American History*, 84(2) (1997), pp. 524–558.
2. K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton, 1996); David W. Cohen, *The Combing of History* (Chicago, 1994); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991); Samuel Shama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (New York, 1992).
3. Slavenka Drakulic, *Cafe Europa* (New York, 1996), p. 187.
4. Cohen, *Combing of History*.
5. Gerstle, “Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans,” p. 555.
6. David A. Hollinger, “National Solidarity at the End of the Twentieth Century: Reflections on the United States and Liberal Nationalism,” *Journal of American History*, 84(2) (1997), pp. 559–569, 565.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 569.
9. Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Coping with Multicultural Illiteracy: A Teacher Education Response,” *Social Education*, 55 (1991), pp. 186–187, 194; Bruce A. VanSledright, “‘I Don’t Remember—the Ideas Are All Jumbled in My Head’: 8th Graders’ Reconstructions of Colonial American History,” *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 10 (1996), pp. 317–345.
10. JoBeth Allen, ed., *Class Actions: Teaching for Social Justice in Elementary and Middle School* (New York, 1998); Etta R. Hollins, *Culture in School Learning: Revealing the Deep Meaning* (Mahwah, NJ, 1996); Ladson-Billings, “Multicultural Illiteracy”; Theresa Mickey McCormick, *Creating the Nonsexist Classroom: A Multicultural Approach* (New York, 1994).
11. VanSledright, “I Don’t Remember.”
12. Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, “‘It Wasn’t a Good Part of History’: National Identity and Students’ Explanations of Historical Significance,” *Teachers College Record*, 99(3) (1998), pp. 478–513; Terrie L. Epstein, “Makes No Difference If You’re Black or White? African American and European American Adolescents’ Perspectives on Historical Significance and Historical Sources,” paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 1994; Terrie L. Epstein, “Sociocultural Approaches to Young People’s Historical Understanding,” *Social Education*, 61 (1997), pp. 28–31; Peter Seixas, “Mapping the Terrain of Historical Significance,” *Social Education*, 61 (1997), pp. 22–28.
13. Jane J. White, “Teaching Anthropology to Precollegiate Teachers and

Students," in C. P. Kottak et al., eds., *The Teaching of Anthropology: Problems, Issues, and Decisions* (Mountain View, CA, 1997), pp. 289–298.

14. Ibid.

15. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Mahwah, NJ, 1997); Linda S. Levstik, "The Boys We Know; the Girls in this School," *International Journal of Social Studies* (in press).

16. Group rather than individual interviews were used in order to promote discussion and elaboration among participants. We used single-sex groups in the student study in order to provide more easily analyzed data on gender differences. This was not possible with the teachers and teacher candidates, as there were only three men in the participant pool. Ethnic identification of students was based on teachers' judgments and students' self-identification; adults self-identified.

17. See, for instance, Barton and Levstik, "National Identity."

18. All the teachers and teacher candidates were enrolled in undergraduate (teacher candidates) or graduate (teachers) courses and were familiar with small-group work during which instructors moved among groups. Questions that arose were most often procedural ("Can we really only pick eight?"), though sometimes participants asked for more specific historical information ("When did women get the vote in England?"), and I briefly answered these questions.

19. John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992).

20. 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 (1990), pp. 688–726; VanSledright, "I Don't Remember."

21. Interestingly, whenever the name of Christopher Columbus arose, students were quick to point out either that Native Americans already lived in North America or that the Vikings had explored here and that Columbus could not therefore be considered to have discovered the continent.

22. Keith C. Barton, "'Bossed Around by the Queen': Elementary Students Understanding of Individuals and Institutions in History," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* (in press).

23. See also Levstik, "The Boys We Know"; Barton and Levstik, *Doing History*.

24. Gerstle, "Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans"; John R. Gillis, "Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship," in R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 3–24; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL, 1948); Edward Shils, "Tradition," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 13 (1971), pp. 122–159; Robert Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York, 1977).

25. Gerstle, "Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans."

26. Anne Martin, "Social Studies in Kindergarten: A Case Study," *Elementary School Journal*, 90(3) (1990), pp. 305–317.

27. The students interviewed included children who identified themselves as African American, as being of European extraction, or as a mixture of these. In one of the schools, about one-fourth of the students interviewed were first- or second-generation residents of the United States.

28. Kammen, *Mystic Chords*.

29. White, "Teaching Anthropology," p. 291.

30. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994); Bodnar, *Remaking America*; Henry S. Commager, "The Search for a Usable Past," *American Heritage Magazine* (1965), pp. 4–9; M. Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, 1986); Patricia H. Hinchey, *Finding Freedom in the Classroom: A Practical Introduction to Critical Theory* (New York, 1998); Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion*; Shils, "Tradition"; Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.

31. Appiah and Gutman, *Color Conscious*.

32. White, "Teaching Anthropology."

33. Allen, *Class Actions*; Ladson-Billings, "Multicultural Illiteracy."

34. Linda McNeil, "Empowering Students: Beyond Defensive Teaching in Social Studies," in C. Emihovich, ed., *Locating Learning: Ethnographic Perspectives on Classroom Research* (Norwood, NJ, 1989), pp. 117–139; White, "Teaching Anthropology."

35. Not all teachers and teacher candidates identified specific courses in responding to the question about where they had learned about history. All of them reported studying American history at the precollegiate and collegiate level. The teacher candidates generally take a two-semester sequence in American history (some students took Advanced Placement American history in high school instead). There are insufficient data to describe the specific courses taken by the teachers.

36. Jere Brophy and Bruce VanSledright, *Teaching and Learning History in Elementary Schools* (New York, 1997); Tom Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding* (New York, 1990); Levstik and Barton, *Doing History*.

37. Gerstle, "Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans."

38. Jane J. White, "Teaching about Cultural Diversity," in C. Kottak, J. White, R. Furlow, and P. Rice, eds., *The Teaching of Anthropology: Problems, Issues, and Decisions* (Mountain View, CA, 1997), pp. 70–76, 71–72.

39. Gerstle, "Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans."

40. Fred M. Newmann, Walter G. Secada, and Gary G. Wehlage, *A Guide to Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Vision, Standards and Scoring* (Madison, WI, 1995).

41. Holt, *Thinking Historically*; Levstik and Barton, *Doing History*.

42. See, for instance, *ibid.*

43. Linda S. Levstik, "Any History Is Someone's History": Listening to Multiple Voices from the Past," *Social Education*, 61(1) (1997), pp. 48-51.

44. Allen, *Class Actions*; Carole L. Hahn, *Becoming Political* (Albany, 1998); Levstik, "Any History"; Levstik and Barton, *Doing History*; James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York, 1995).

45. Holt, *Thinking Historically*; Levstik and Barton, *Doing History*.

46. Dennie P. Wolf and Robert Orrill, "Editors' Introduction," in Tom Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding* (New York, 1990), pp. xi-xiv.

47. Barton and Levstik, "National Identity."

Appendix

Pictures

Adolescent Study

Hernando de Soto
The First Thanksgiving
The American Revolution
The Bill of Rights
Emancipation Proclamation
Western frontier
Electric light bulb
Public education
Immigration
First successful airplane
Women's suffrage
Development of the car
Depression
World War
Polio vaccine
Civil rights movement
Rock 'n' roll/Elvis Presley
Vietnam War
Computer
O. J. Simpson Trial

Additional Pictures: Adult Study

Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire
Indian Removal Bill/Trail of Tears
Induction ceremony for U.S. citizenship
Executive Order No. 9066
United Farmworkers demonstration

Interview Questions

Adolescent Study

1. Why did you choose this one [point to each]?
2. Which pictures do you think other people might have picked, and why?
3. Are there any pictures that you don't think anyone would pick? Why?
4. [Point to any pictures not mentioned] Can you think of any reason someone might have included this one?
5. Is there anything in history that's not on any of these pictures that you think should have been included?
6. If a group of [opposite sex: girls/boys] were doing this, do you think they would make any choices different than you did?
7. If little kids, like third or fourth graders, were doing this, what do you think might be different about their choices?
8. If older people, like your parents' or grandparents' ages, were doing this, what do you think might be different about their choices?
9. What are the most important things about history that you've learned in school, and why do you think they're important? What are the least important things you've learned about history in school, and why don't you think they're as important?
10. What are the most important things about history you've learned outside of school?

Adult Study

1. Which pictures do you think other people might have picked, and why?
2. Are there any pictures that you don't think anyone would pick? Why?
3. Is there anything in history that's not represented in any of these pictures that you think should have been included?
4. If a group of your students were doing this, do you think they would make any choices different than you did?
5. If students younger or older than yours were doing this, what do you think might be different about their choices?
6. What are the most important things about history that you've learned in school (including college/university), and why do you think they're important? What are the least important things you've learned about history in school (including college/university), and why don't you think they're as important?
7. What are the most important things about history you've learned outside of school?