

**CANADIAN SOCIAL STUDIES VOLUME 39 NUMBER 1, FALL
2004 www.quasar.ualberta.ca/css Special Issue: Social Studies Research and Teaching in
Elementary Schools**

**Historical Thinking in the Elementary Years: A Review of Current Research
Amy von Heyking University of Alberta**

Abstract

Two important developments have occurred in the field of history education that have had important implications for elementary school teachers. First, our understanding of history as a discipline reflects a new understanding about the nature and purpose of history teaching. Second, we have a better understanding of the cognitive capacities of elementary school children, which means that new programs require even very young children in our schools to engage in historical thinking tasks. Peter Seixas (1996) identified six specific elements in the structure of the discipline of history that provide a coherent and thorough framework for an analysis of historical thinking. These elements will provide a framework for a review of current research into children's historical thinking and for suggested activities that would appropriately address these elements in elementary school history classrooms.

History has long held a privileged place within the social studies. It has been seen as essential in the creation of a national identity, the school subject uniquely responsible for the creation of a common collective memory. For many years, however, the specific thinking skills associated with history instruction were those associated with making sense of time and chronology. Given elementary children's cognitive limitations in dealing with the mathematical concepts of time and chronological sequence, it was not surprising that little formal history instruction was required in Canada's elementary schools.

Moreover, history's integration into the social studies meant that it was generally treated as a source of data for solving current problems. Rather than being recognized as a unique form of inquiry, this approach meant that history was used in the service of a social science decision-making or problem-solving approach. There are at least two assumptions about the nature of history as a discipline embodied in this approach that have considerable pedagogical implications. First, it implies that history is about important public issues, current political, economic and social trends, rather than about everyday life or a family's past. These issues or problems usually require an understanding of very abstract concepts such as government and trade, concepts beyond the cognitive capabilities of most elementary children and certainly outside their experience. This was sufficient reason for delaying formal history instruction until after elementary school. The second implication of this approach is that the study of history can actually reveal facts that may be used to solve current problems. It assumes that we in essence "mine" the past to discover indisputable facts that offer clear and obvious lessons. That the "facts" might be disputable; that the events of long ago might be seen by different people in different ways; that there may indeed be any number of contradictory yet plausible accounts of the past; that history could be used to prove or justify any number of moral or policy positions simply was not acknowledged in this approach to history teaching within social studies.

Two important developments occurred in the field of history education that challenged these assumptions. First, our understanding of history as a discipline has been enriched and essentially

reshaped which means that new history programs reflect a very different understanding about the nature and purpose of history teaching. Second, we have a better understanding of the cognitive capacities of elementary school children, which means that new programs require even very young children in our schools to engage in historical thinking tasks. History and social studies curricula across Canada, the United States and Europe have been redrawn over the last decade to reflect these new understandings of the discipline and the nature of learning. For example, the province of Alberta's new program of studies in social studies acknowledges historical thinking as unique. It is not simply defined as a kind of critical thinking, but instead is described as:

a process whereby students are challenged to rethink assumptions about the past and reimagine both the present and the future. It helps students become well-informed citizens who approach issues with an inquiring mind and exercise sound judgment when presented with new information or a perspective different from their own. Historical thinking skills involve the sequencing of events, the analysis of patterns and the placement of events in context to assist in the construction of meaning and understanding, and can be applied to a variety of media, such as oral traditions, print, electronic text, art and music (Alberta Learning 2003, 9).

The Nature and Purpose of History in Elementary School

History is not the story of the past. It is not a record of events that happened long ago. It is a form of inquiry that helps us construct an understanding of our own lives (individually and collectively) in time. It is an interpretive discipline, requiring that students determine the validity and credibility of evidence in order to analyze and to construct and reconstruct narratives about people, events and ideas of the past (Foster and Yeager, 1999). Levstik and Barton (2001) stress that the history taught in schools has traditionally consisted of a single narrative that marginalized or denigrated the experience of women, members of the working class and people of racial and ethnic minorities. They argue that an understanding of the discipline that acknowledges its interpretive nature - and therefore values the construction of many valid stories about the past and acknowledges the controversial nature of those constructions - would help children explore their own and their families' connection to the past, would empower them to imagine possible futures, would allow them to consider significant themes and questions in history, would encourage them to be critical readers of historical narrative, and would acknowledge the diversity of questions and topics of interest to historians beyond past politics. History of this kind is powerful and exciting. It requires that children move beyond memorizing a story and instead engage in the creation of stories about the past. But can elementary school children do this?

Children's Historical Understanding

The earliest examinations of children's cognitive development within the context of history seemed to indicate that the subject was largely meaningless to students until the age of fourteen. Using Piaget's stages of cognitive development, researchers such as R.N. Hallam (1970) concluded that when faced with tasks requiring historical thinking, students under the age of sixteen were generally at the concrete operational stage and therefore could not reasonably be expected to cope with abstract concepts or tasks, such as hypothesizing beyond what is readily apparent in source material or synthesizing material drawn from many different sources. Clearly history as investigation, analysis and interpretation would be beyond the ability of elementary school children if this assessment of children's abilities was accepted.

Researchers now have largely rejected universal cognitive development theories. Instead, they define learning as a reordering of prior knowledge according to "scripts" which are domain specific (Levstik, 1993). In other words, learners use their prior mental structures of a discipline when they are confronted with something new in the field. This means that teachers need to acknowledge that elementary children do indeed bring considerable prior knowledge to the learning of history. In 1992 researchers VanSledright and Brophy stressed that children could not be expected to understand history in the same way that they might the physical sciences, because in contrast to their direct experience of the natural world, children's experiences with history are remote. Seixas (1996) disputes this claim stressing that children from a very young age encounter traces of the past in the natural and manmade landscape, in the relics of the past, in the language they use and in the cultural institutions of which they are a part. Moreover, children experience many accounts of the past on television and film, in books, in family stories and in commemorations. British researcher Hilary Cooper likewise argues:

the past is a dimension of children's social and physical environment and they interact with it from birth. They hear and use the vocabulary of time and change: old, new, yesterday, tomorrow, last year, before you were born, when mummy was little, a long time ago, once upon a time. They ask questions about the sequence and causes of events: when did we move here? Why? What happened in the story next? Children encounter different interpretations of past times in nursery rhymes and fairy stories, family anecdotes, theme parks, films and pantomime. They encounter historical sources: old photographs, a baby book, an ornament, a statue, a church, maybe a closed-down factory or a derelict cinema being replaced by new roads and flats ... before children start school there are many contexts in which they are implicitly aware of the past (1995, 1-2).

Research designed to determine children's prior understandings of time and history supports the contention that students have some conception of history as the study of significant events in the past and may even possess specific understandings of particular historical events as early as the second grade (Levstik and Pappas, 1987). Opportunities to share these prior understandings should therefore be incorporated into every elementary teacher's history teaching units. Many studies support the claim that elementary children and adolescents can develop quite sophisticated historical thinking skills within an appropriate context of active engagement with source material, alternative accounts and teaching that scaffolds children's emerging understandings and skills (Barton 1997b; Booth 1994; Foster and Yeager 1999; Levstik and Smith 1996; VanSledright 2002b). As Levstik reminds us, this "implies that educators may have considerably more influence over children's cognitive development than global-stage theory assumes ... if prior knowledge and extensive experience in a particular domain are major influences on knowledge restructuring and theory building in younger children, then educators need to think carefully about how to facilitate that engagement" (1993, 3). It is helpful, therefore, to examine more thoroughly the specific elements of historical thinking that define this domain, review current research in order to determine the extent and nature of children's work with these elements, and suggest ways in which teachers could engage students in meaningful tasks that would build children's understandings in history.

Historical Thinking

Just as there are innumerable definitions of history as an academic discipline and as a school subject, there are many different explanations of historical thinking. Peter Seixas (1996) identified six specific elements in the structure of the discipline of history that provide a coherent and thorough framework for an analysis of historical thinking. These elements will provide a framework for a review of current research into children's historical thinking.

1) Significance

History is not a chronicle of everything that happened in the past. Historians make decisions about what is important; students need to be able to distinguish between what is trivial and what is important. In some cases historical significance is determined by an event's or idea's or person's long-term impact. But this alone is not sufficient to determine historical significance. Historical significance is also determined by our current interests and values: the priorities of the present determine the questions we ask about the past and nature of the evidence we use. Historians used to ask questions that were largely political or economic in nature. Why do we have this form of government? How did these particular patterns of trade develop? That the everyday lives of people - particularly women, children, people of the working class, people of ethnic minorities - might be significant simply was not considered. Now of course historians have broadened their questions their questions to include precisely these things, so increasingly there is adequate content in which to ground children's historical studies of schooling in the past or the history of sports in their community for example. Students can engage in investigations of the history of their local communities or of everyday life in the past, topics of relevance and interest to them.

Research suggests that even children as young as second grade can distinguish between "history" and "the past" (Levstik and Pappas, 1987). By grade six they are able to explain and support their definitions with examples, suggesting that historical events are often rooted in conflict and result in social change. Research also suggests, however, that teachers could be much more deliberate in their discussions with children about historical significance. In studies conducted by Barton and Levstik (1998) and by Yeager, Foster and Greer (2002), students identified were heavily influenced by their national identity in choosing events of historical significance. In Barton and Levstik's study, students chose the American Revolution and the Emancipation Proclamation and other events they saw as emblematic of the development of American independence and freedom. Students avoided events like the Great Depression that did not seem to "fit" the master narrative of America's continuous progress typical of school textbook accounts of American history. Researchers stress the important opportunities available to teachers to engage students in discussions about why some events, people or ideas are included in school history curricula and texts, and why others are omitted. Historical events that are significant to students or are contentious because they occurred within the living memory of parents and grandparents provide particularly rich opportunities for students to consider what makes certain episodes and people of the past important. Barton and Levstik were struck by the interest with which the children in their study talked about the Vietnam War and suggested that an investigation into the war and its legacy would be a powerful illustration for children of the extent to which history embodies "the viewpoint of the present" (1998, para 57).

Young children learning about their local community could address the element of historical significance by considering for whom their school or other places in the community are named. Why are these people important? Have they learned about other people in their community for

whom something should be named? They could consider what will be significant about their own lives by creating time capsules that illustrate what life is like in the beginning of the 21st century. They should explain why they have included certain artifacts and omitted others. They might compare the choices they made with the choices of students in a more senior grade or with the choices their parents might make. Exercises like these prepare children well for later studies that further illustrate that historical significance depends largely on your point of view.

2) Epistemology and Evidence

Another important element of historical thinking involves understanding how we come to know about the past. What evidence do we have? How reliable is this evidence? How can we explain historical accounts that offer different, even contradictory, interpretations of events in the past? Children should not be left with the impression that there is one true story of the past. Nor should they think that historians make things up. Children need to understand that historians draw inferences based on evidence; some inferences are better than others; some evidence is more credible. Researchers suggest that this element of historical thinking — determining the credibility of evidence, weighing different kinds of evidence, understanding how historians use evidence to weave a narrative — is difficult for children.

British researcher Peter Lee (1998) found an age-related progression of ideas about the nature of historical accounts when children aged 7 to 14 were presented with differing accounts of the same historical event. The youngest children were more likely to believe the accounts at face value: they argued that the accounts were not so much different in content than in the vocabulary they used. When obvious contradictions were pointed out to them, they assumed that one narrator had more information or the other mistaken. Older children were more likely to see the accounts as authored by people with particular biases, and some understood that accounts would differ according to the questions historians asked or the nature of their investigations. This would seem to support Piaget's assertion that young children cannot hold more than one perspective at one time (and therefore Hallam's conclusion that critical analysis of historical evidence is of little use with elementary school children). But researchers reach a different conclusion.

First it is clear that while young children may have difficulty with the nuanced and varied interpretations of historical evidence, they are quite comfortable recognizing and accepting multiple perspectives in literature for example. H. Cooper states that young children are capable of comparing and contrasting versions of fairy tales and nursery rhymes from different cultures. They can appreciate the differing perspectives offered by alternative versions of familiar fairy tales. They can debate varying interpretations of stories they listen to or read. She insists that these exercises in a familiar context prepare the ground for historical thinking skills. She goes on to suggest that young children can begin to appreciate the interpretative nature of history: "Young children can begin to understand why there may be more than one version of a story about the past. In order to do so they need opportunities to create their own interpretations, based on what they know, and to see how and why they may differ" (1995, 17). In other words, children need to engage in historical inquiries within the context of their family history or other familiar surroundings in order to gain first-hand experience with the interpretation of evidence. Children can examine photographs, analyze physical artifacts and interview relatives in order to create accounts about their own past. They can compare and contrast their accounts with those of their parents or siblings. They can draw inferences from a school backpack or an antique trunk full of objects. Who do you think this

belongs to? What do you think this person is like? What does s/he like to do for fun? An exercise like this requires them to make tentative assumptions based on the evidence they have and generate questions to guide further inquiry. Peter Knight reminds us that even very young children can improve their historical reasoning by responding to three questions when presented with any traditional primary source: "What do you know for certain about it? What can you guess? What would you like to know?" (1993, 95).

Many studies indicate that by upper elementary school, children are quite capable of sophisticated reasoning when appropriately supported through the analysis of historical evidence and accounts (Barton 1997b; Foster and Yeager 1999; Levstik and Smith 1996; VanSledright 2002a, 2002b, 2002c; VanSledright and Kelly 1998). But researchers concede that several challenges remain. Foster and Yeager demonstrated that 12-year-olds were able to critique sources by detecting bias and identifying gaps in the evidence, but they displayed naïve understandings by insisting that "mixing sources would yield a definitive truth" (1999, 311). They had difficulty assessing the validity of sources and using that assessment to weigh differing viewpoints. VanSledright and Kelly found that students, without sufficient content background or contextual information, assessed the validity of a source by the amount of information it provided (1998). They concluded that this criterion was not unreasonable given that this is often how multiple sources are used in elementary classrooms. They stressed that teachers need to make more effort to help children analyze accounts and identify the evidence upon which they are based.

Barton was impressed with the ability of fourth and fifth grade students to identify historical sources, evaluate evidence and reconcile contradictory accounts of the battle of Lexington Green (1997b). His study, however, also revealed that when students were asked to construct their own accounts of the battle, they completely ignored the evidence they had spent so much time and effort sifting through and analyzing. They simply did not connect the use of evidence with the creation of the historical narrative. He suggests several reasons for this curious failure and asserts that this indicates that teachers should exercise caution when using fictional narratives in their history teaching in elementary schools. Since students at this age are most familiar with narrative as a fictional form, they need explicit instruction in and opportunities to examine the evidence upon which historical narratives are constructed. They should, for example, use source material to determine which episodes in a story or novel are likely to be true and which are invented by the author. They need to compare and contrast historical fiction with nonfiction accounts. They also need to engage in historical inquiries of immediate relevance to them that require the use of evidence in the creation of original narratives, rather than recapitulating historiographical debates about events that are safely remote from their experience. He emphasizes not the limitations of elementary students' historical thinking regarding the use of evidence, but says that "students' performance should be seen as an early point on a continuum of historical thinking, a starting point along which will involve expanding exposure to historical sources and instruction in their evaluation and use" (1997b, 420-1).

3) Continuity and Change

Understanding change over time is central to historical thinking. Obviously age can be an important factor in gaining this understanding: an older person has simply had more direct experience with historical change — in technology, in values — and therefore has a better sense of what and how things change than a very young person. But researchers suggest that age is not the only factor; life

experience can help even young children appreciate the nature of change. A young person who has lived through a war, a refugee experience, who immigrates to a new country, or who has had to move because a parent lost a job, may have better understanding of historical change than someone who has always lived in a very stable environment. But outside direct experience, there are also critical concepts that must be addressed with children in order for them to come to a rich understanding of the nature of continuity and change in time.

First, children must have a grasp of time concepts. Primary children's understanding of time concepts is generally vague (Seefeldt 1993). They can read clock time, recite days, months and seasons in order and can use terms like "tonight" or "tomorrow" to describe a point in time. Units of time that require an understanding of decades and centuries must wait for the upper elementary grades. But researchers stress the importance of helping even very young children with time categories such as "past" and "present" or "then" and "now." Children should begin by examining objects and photographs from their own childhood and by learning about the lives of elders in their community (Seefeldt 1993). They can also examine archival and current photographs of familiar scenes - schools or local streetscapes - and categorize them as past and present (H. Cooper 1995). Well-illustrated picture books also provide an opportunity to identify elements of the story or illustration that provide clues as to its setting in time. When did this story take place? How do you know? Are there clues in the illustrations?

Sequence is another critical concept in understanding change over time. Researchers working with very young children stress the importance of developing their understanding of a sequence of events by using familiar contexts. Christine Cooper (2003) described the strategies used by the staff of an Infants' school in the United Kingdom to help their students build their understandings over the course of several grades. The reception class practiced sequencing photographs that showed activities and routines of their school day. Year 1 children moved beyond sequencing the events of their day to sequencing months and special events in the year for a classroom "memory line" and creating a personal timeline. They also examined photographs of the school and its playground dating from ten years previously to compare and contrast their school "then" and "now." Studies indicate that when faced with pictures and photographs from various historical eras, even young children can place them in the correct chronological sequence (Barton and Levstik 1996). Using clues from the material culture portrayed in the photographs, young children could identify the sequence even if they lacked the appropriate time vocabulary to label the pictures. Upper elementary children were more likely to identify historical eras, include references to political history and rely less on evidence of technological change when sequencing the pictures. They were likely to identify pictures with specific dates and made obvious attempts to draw on their background knowledge of school history as well as information they had gleaned from the media, family history and trade fiction and nonfiction.

Sequencing exercises, however, do not by themselves aid students' understanding of change and continuity. Seefeldt stresses the importance of structuring opportunities for young children to observe and record changes in themselves, their school and their community. Following the seasonal changes of a tree in the schoolyard, keeping records of the children's own growth and tracking a construction project in the neighbourhood can all help children understand that "(1) change is continuous and always present; (2) change affects people in different ways; and (3) change can be recorded and become a record of the past" (1993, 147). While young children should

begin with, they should not be restricted to an understanding of personal change. With appropriate support they can begin to think about changes over time in their families, schools and communities. Researcher Keith Barton has indicated that upper elementary students are quite adept at observing changes in material culture, technology and social life and can categorize events according to broad historical periods. He has also found, however, that children at this age level face difficulties that can be addressed by specific instructional considerations. In a 2002 study of children in Northern Ireland, he concluded that, "as part of their explorations of the people, events, and lifestyles of the past, students should also be exploring when those things happened - which came earlier or later (sequencing), what other things were going on at the same time (grouping), and how far apart they are from each other or the present (measuring)" (2002, 178). In other words, students need to see connections in order to construct a sense of the broad sweep of time.

His 1996 study revealed that children constructed simplified narratives that distorted history. They seemed to assume, for example, that historical change follows a uniform and linear pattern: immigrants came to America, they lived in small cabins, they built cities. They were confused by evidence of "pioneer" life well after the establishment of cities on the eastern seaboard of the United States. They identified a photograph of a boat entering Ellis Island as the Mayflower. They also believed that once a "problem" had been solved it was no longer an issue. For example, they said that once women's suffrage was won, women were equal and no longer faced discrimination. Barton emphasizes the importance of teachers providing opportunities for children to understand the wide range of lifestyles and experience in any given historical period: "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" (1996, 74). Barton also found that children who were able to appreciate the subtleties of historical change were those who could make connections with their own experiences. Again it is clear that historical investigations of questions relevant to children are most likely to lead to more sophisticated historical understandings.

4) Progress and Decline

Seixas points out that "school textbooks have typically told a whig history, conveying an underlying message of the growth of democracy, knowledge, and enlightenment through time" (1996, 773). Many studies suggest that elementary students have clearly gotten this message. Barton's 1996 study indicated the extent to which children thought that history is the story of constant progress, that life - whether in terms of political participation, technological advantages or amount of leisure time - has always improved over time. Barton and Levstik's 1998 study revealed that when children were asked to identify the most important events in American history, they rejected any idea or event that challenged the dominant message of their American history studies: that the nation has continuously progressed toward greater liberty and freedom for all. These researchers have suggested that challenging these dominant messages, purposefully provoking students with examples that encourage alternative readings, might in fact be the best way to create the cognitive dissonance that leads to growth in understanding.

Students when studying a particular era in history could simply be asked to consider in what ways life has improved and in which ways life has gotten worse since the period being examined. If

children are interviewing parents or elders about their childhoods, they could be directed to ask these adults whether life had improved or declined and in what ways. The purpose of such questions and considerations is so that children do not become cynics any more than sunny optimists, but rather that they begin to consider the complex nature of change and social responsibility. As Barton and Levstik state: "the challenge, it seems to us, is to introduce students to the richer complexities of the past within a context that provides some framework for making critical sense out of both legitimating stories and alternative, vernacular histories - and to decide for themselves whether 'this flawed system' is better than the available alternatives or not" (1998, para 53).

5) Empathy and Moral Judgment

Historian Gerda Lerner states that meaningful historical study, "demands imagination and empathy, so that we can fathom worlds unlike our own, contexts far from those we know, ways of thinking and feeling that are alien to us. We must enter past worlds with curiosity and respect" (1997, 201). In previous social studies curricula, helping children empathize with people of the past has often been described as an "affective" outcome. Historians and those who engage in research in history teaching and learning do not describe it this way. British researcher Christopher Portal argues that, "empathy is a way of thinking imaginatively which needs to be used in conjunction with other cognitive skills in order to see significant human values in history" (1987, 89). It is in fact what defines the discipline of history within the humanities rather than the positivistic sciences: it is the creative leap that must often be made from the documentary evidence available to historians. Foster and Yeager also reject the definition of empathy as the exercise of fanciful imagination, and instead define it as "a considered and active process," one that allows students to bridge the gap between what is known from evidence and what may be inferred given what we know about the context of the time and individuals involved (1998, 1-2).

Levstik's 1993 study of effective history teaching in a Grade One classroom demonstrated that the teacher's conception of history affected the nature of her instruction. In this case, a teacher in a racially diverse and low socio-economic status school wanted to empower her students through the study of history. She wanted her students to identify with historical figures who had overcome challenges not just to improve their personal fortunes, but to improve the lives of others: George Washington Carver and Martin Luther King Jr. for example. Their stories became reminders of the power - and of the responsibility - of individuals to make a difference in their communities. They became inspirations and role models for the children. Levstik observed that this teacher, "used children's personal responses to both foster empathy with more distant people and build a vision of a better and communal world" (1993, 20). But Levstik clearly recognizes that encouraging children's identification with these historical figures may have simplified but it did not distort the children's understanding of the past; indeed it was a way to motivate further inquiry into their circumstances and build children's investigative skills so that their empathy was grounded in an informed understanding of the past.

Hilary Cooper too emphasizes that the study of history develops children's moral awareness because it encourages children "to ask questions, to discuss and to speculate about the reasons for people's behaviour, attitudes and values in other times and other places" (1995, 3). She suggests that many teaching strategies can help children empathize with people in the past. Imaginative play, stimulated by stories about the past, is a good place to begin with very young children. She

acknowledges that the play is largely driven by fantasy rather than any connection to historical evidence, but asserts that, "in play set in an historical context, children are, in an embryonic way, embarking on the process of finding out about and trying to understand and reconstruct past times. This can be the beginning of a continuum in which, with maturity, fantasy will gradually diminish and a search for what is known will become increasingly important" (1995, 21). Role plays, simulations, and field trips to historic sites can all help elementary children develop empathy with people in the past. With appropriate structure, guidelines and constructive intervention by the teacher, these strategies will ensure that children understand the importance of grounding their historical reconstructions in evidence.

The paradox of empathy, and its value in developing historical understanding, is that it involves confronting difference at the same time that we recognize a common humanity that transcends time. It allows us to recognize something familiar at the same time acknowledging that times have changed in profound ways. Ultimately it cultivates humility and prudence in our attempts to understand people of the past, essential qualities as we seek to make connections among cultures and nations in the world today.

6) Historical Agency

The final element of historical thinking refers to causation: historical agency refers to understanding how and why things change. Research suggests that elementary children have extremely simplistic notions of the reasons for historical change. They tend to see history as a record of the accomplishments of a few important people (Barton 1996; Barton 1997a; VanSledright and Brophy 1992): Lincoln freed the slaves; Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches resulted in improved civil rights for African-Americans. This is hardly surprising given the traditional "Great Man" interpretations of history presented in textbooks for elementary children. Whether children's understandings of causation are deepened by historical accounts that integrate multiple perspectives or feature the stories of those previously ignored or marginalized in official accounts, remains to be seen. Research also suggests that children do not understand the scale of historic events they have studied or the numbers of people involved. After studying the American Revolutionary War, for example, Grade Five 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" (Barton 1996, 66-67). Barton also asserts that elementary children have difficulty appreciating the social, economic and political factors that lead to change; they do not understand the role of social and political institutions (Barton 1997a). He describes the extensive direct teaching about taxation and representative government that were necessary for Grade Five students to appreciate the reasons for the American Revolutionary War, but discovered that students still failed to make any appropriate reference to the relationship between Britain and the North American colonies when they engaged in a debate about independence. For these young students, the British Crown was obviously bullying the Americans into paying taxes that were unreasonable. Any attempt the teacher made to explain the economic and political issues at stake was ignored. This seems to indicate that lengthy or detailed study of political, military and economic history is probably inappropriate for elementary children. On the other hand, because children so readily appreciate that history is about real people, history teaching at the elementary school level can potentially encourage a sense of efficacy, can help them understand that they themselves are historical actors.

Understanding that the actions of people in the past have an impact on us today, and appreciating that our actions will have consequences for future generations is history teaching's essential contribution to citizenship education. Thinking historically does not just mean thinking about the past; it involves seeing oneself in time, as an inheritor of the legacies of the past and as a maker of the future. As historian Gerda Lerner says, "It gives us a sense of perspective about our own lives and encourages us to transcend the finite span of our life-time by identifying with the generations that came before us and measuring our own actions against the generations that will follow ... We can expand our reach and with it our aspirations" (1997, 201). History teaching in the elementary schools therefore should offer opportunities for children to make a difference in the future of their communities. Projects such as the preservation of historic sites or the erection of historical monuments, or projects that involve them in environmental conservation would empower children and help them see the benefits of community service. This is why history is not only appropriate for elementary children; it is essential.

References

- Alberta Learning. (2003). Program of Studies: Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12, Validation Draft. Edmonton: Alberta Learning.
- Barton, K.C. (1997a). "Bossed around by the queen": Elementary students' understanding of individuals and institutions in history. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 12 (4), pp. 290-315. Retrieved September 10, 2004 from Proquest database. Available from <http://www.library.ualberta.ca/getit/>
- Barton, K.C. (1997b). "I just kinda know": Elementary students' ideas about historical evidence. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 25 (4), 407-430.
- Barton, K.C. (1996). Narrative simplifications in elementary students' historical thinking. *Advances in Research on Teaching*, Vol. 6: *Teaching and Learning in History*, Brophy, J. (ed.). Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, Inc., 51-84.
- Barton, K.C. (2002). "Oh, that's a tricky piece!": Children, mediated action, and the tools of historical time. *The Elementary School Journal*, 103 (2), 161-183.
- Barton, K.C. and Levstik, L.S. (1996). "Back when God was around and everything": Elementary children's understanding of historical time. *American Educational Research Journal*, 33 (2), 419-454.
- Barton, K.C. and Levstik, L.S. (1998). "It wasn't a good part of history": National identity and students' explanations of historical significance. *Teachers College Record*, 99 (3). Retrieved August 23, 2004 from Blackwell Synergy database. Available from <http://www.library.ualberta.ca/getit/>.
- Brophy J. and VanSledright, B. (1997). *Teaching and Learning History in Elementary Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cooper, C. (2003). History: finding out about the past and the language of time. *Teaching Across the Early Years 3-7*. Cooper, H. and Sixsmith, C. (eds.). London: Routledge Falmer, 153-167.
- Cooper, H. (1995). *History in the Early Years*. London: Routledge.
- Foster S.J. and Yeager, E.A. (1998). The role of empathy in the development of historical understanding. *International Journal of Social Education*, 13 (1), 1-7.
- Foster, S.J. and Yeager, E.A. (1999). "You've got to put together the pieces": English 12-year-olds encounter and learn from historical evidence. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 14 (4), 286-317.
- Hallam, R.N. (1970). Piaget and thinking in history. *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History*. Ballard, M. (ed.). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 162-178.
- Knight, P. (1993). *Primary Geography, Primary History*. London: David Fulton Pub.
- Lee, P. (1998). Making sense of historical accounts. *Canadian Social Studies*, 32 (2), 52-54.
- Lerner, G. (1997). *Why History Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levstik, L.S. (1993). Building a sense of history in a first-grade classroom. *Advances in Research on Teaching*, Vol. 4: *Research in Elementary Social Studies*. Brophy, J. (ed.). Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, Inc., 1-31.
- Levstik, L.S. and Barton, K.C. (2001). *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*. 2nd ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Levstik, L.S. and Barton, K.C. (1996). "They still use some of their past": Historical salience in elementary children's chronological thinking. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 28 (5), 531-576.
- Levstik, L.S. and Smith, D.B. (1996). "I've never done this before": building a community of historical inquiry in a third-grade classroom. *Advances in Research on Teaching*, Vol. 6: *Teaching and Learning in History*. Brophy, J. (ed.). Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, Inc., 85-114.
- Portal, C. (1987). Empathy as an objective for history teaching. *The History Curriculum for Teachers*. Portal, C. (ed.). London: The Falmer Press, 89-99.
- Seefeldt, Carol. (1993). History for young children. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 21 (2), 143-155.

- Seixas, Peter. (1996). Conceptualizing the growth of historical understanding. *The Handbook of Education and Human Development*. Olson, D.R. and Torrance, N. (eds.). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 765-783.
- VanSledright, B. (2002a). Confronting history's interpretative paradox while teaching fifth graders to investigate the past. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39 (4), 1089-1115.
- VanSledright, B. (2002b). Fifth graders investigating history in the classroom: results from a researcher-practitioner design experiment. *The Elementary School Journal*, 103 (2), 131-160.
- VanSledright, B. (2002c). *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- VanSledright, B. and Brophy J. (1992). Storytelling, imagination, and fanciful elaboration in children's historical reconstructions. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29 (4), 837-859.
- VanSledright, B. and Kelly, C. (1998). Reading American history: the influence of multiple sources on six fifth graders. *The Elementary School Journal*, 98 (3), 239-265.
- Yeager, E.A., Foster, S.J. and Greer, J. (2002). How eighth graders in England and the United States view historical significance. *The Elementary School Journal*, 103 (2), 199-219.
- Amy von Heyking is an assistant professor in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta.