HISTORICAL LEARNING AND THE WRITING PROCESS: THE WRITING TO LEARN HISTORY PROJECT

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The Writing to Learn History Project at the University of California, Berkeley is examining the relationship between writing activities and historical learning by elementary school students. It is especially concerned about the value of writing activities to facilitate historical thinking. It defines historical thinking as the ability to empathize with people of other times and cultures; to see relationships, including causal connections, over time; to formulate concepts of historical time; and to distinguish between the past (everything that ever happened) and history (what we make of it). The project is a multi-year undertaking, including an initial curriculum development phase, three years of data collecting, and the writing of a final report. This paper is a summary of the first two years of the project's activities.

Asking whether writing activities can facilitate historical thinking in elementary children raises the question of developmental constraints on historical reasoning in children. Studies by Peel (1965, 1967), Hallam (1966, 1967, 1972), and others (Stokes, 1970; Lodwick, 1972) raised serious doubts about children's ability to engage in formal operational thinking with history materials before late adolescence. Children seemed to reach that stage at a later age in historical

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, April 13, 1993.

than in math and science reasoning. Hallam's subjects did not attain formal operational thinking in history until age 16, although Piaget's subjects had reached that level by age 11 or 12. Researchers in the Peel-Hallam tradition assumed that hypothetical and deductive thinking was as necessary for historical thinking as it was for mathematical and scientific reasoning.

More recently, researchers have questioned whether Piagetian categories are appropriate for describing historical thinking. Kennedy (1983) found very weak relationships between measures of historical understanding and developmental level. Historical thinking, according to Booth (1980, 1984), is not primarily deductive thinking. Fischer (1984) has called it "adductive thinking," to distinguish it from both deductive and inductive reasoning. Researchers proceeding from knowledge-based conceptions of cognition have also questioned the application of Piagetian theory to historical thinking. Levstik and Pappas (1987) suggested that knowledge differences rather than global constraints may account for age-related patterns in responses to historical questions. While this research suggested that historical thinking is possible at a younger age than had once been assumed, it has not necessarily established the lower age limits for historical thinking.

As recent reviews of research in the field indicate, the literature on the historical learning of young children is quite limited (Downey & Levstik, 1989, 1991). Much of what does exist has focused on children's conception of time. Research on language development indicates that children learn the distinctions between past, present, and future early in childhood (Wells, 1981, 1985; Harner, 1982). Children begin to develop an understanding of concepts of historical time by

age 5 (Jahoda, 1963; Thornton and Vukelich, 1988). Until then, concepts of time, whether conventional (clock and calendar) or historical time, have little influence on children's thought (Friedman, 1978). They are capable of estimating how long ago events took place and to place events in chronological sequence by age 8 or 9 (Friedman, 1978; Bradley, 1947; Oakden & Sturt, 1922). By that age, children are also able to use such terms as "a long time ago" and can place historical dates in correct sequences. Children in British studies could understand by age 9 that Robin Hood lived before their mother or grandmother's time (Bradley, 1947; but see Applebee, 1978). By age 10 to 12, American students can use more refined labels for historical periods, such as "the Civil War era" (Levstik & Pappas, 1978). Levstik and Pappas also found that children by age 10 were capable of engaging in modest theory generation about the nature of history. Appleby (1978) suggests that embedding time concepts in narrative presentations helps make them comprehensible to children at a young age.

The above studies support several of the assumptions underlying the Writing to Learn History Project. The students that the project targets presumably are old enough to understand basic concepts of historical time. The Levstik and Pappas study (1987) suggested that at least the older students would be able to distinguish between the past and history. The research on narrative forms of discourse indicated that children of this age can see causal as well as temporal relationships. Unfortunately, the research provided no guidance at all as to the capacity of children to develop historical empathetic identification. Nevertheless, pursuing that line of inquiry seemed to be worth the effort.

METHODOLOGY

Project Overview

The project has three phases. The start-up or curriculum development phase began in January 1991, with the development of an experimental third-grade curriculum that focused on the native Americans of the San Francisco Bay Area. The curriculum materials for each subsequent year are being created during the summer preceding the data collection year. The spring of 1991 school semester was also used to develop and pilot test the writing activities and to collect a trial round of data at the school site. The data collection phase began in September 1991 in a third-grade classroom at a single school site. The project was relocated in September 1992 to fourth-grade classrooms at two new sites. It will move again in September 1993 to two fifth-grade sites that have yet to be selected. Interim reports have appeared each year, but the task of synthesizing the data and drawing out the larger implications of the findings will still need to be undertaken.

School Sites and Student Populations

During the past year and a half of data collection, the project has used three school sites. The first was a third-grade classroom in Alameda, California, where data collection began in September 1991. The Alameda site, which for the purpose of this project is called Bay School, was selected because it had a diverse student population typical of inner-city schools in the Bay Area. About 10 percent of the students in the research classroom were English as a Second Language (ESL) students. The students were primarily from blue-collar and lower middle class socio-economic backgrounds. A representative sample of twenty-one students was

selected initially, with the group eventually pared down to sixteen students. That proved to be the maximum number that this researcher could monitor.

The project was relocated at two school sites in Oakland in September 1992 to take advantage of this district's greater variety of schools and student populations. Oakland's demography ranges from affluent upper-middle class neighborhoods in the Oakland hills to heavily immigrant-impacted areas in the flatlands. Of the two Oakland sites that we selected, the one called Flatland School is a school in a low-income neighborhood that has a substantial number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. A language other than English is spoken in about 80 percent of the homes of the students in the research classroom. Including this school made it possible to explore the important question being raised in a study by Valdez and Wong (in progress) about whether and under what conditions a writing-oriented approach to learning will work with LEP students. The second school, called Foothills School in this report, draws students from one of Oakland's middle-class, predominantly white neighborhoods.

Research Procedures

The research subjects in each classroom consist of a sample of sixteen students. They are selected each September with the help of the classroom teacher to obtain a sample that is representative of the socio-economic composition of the class and, in so far as possible, of the school. The students in the research sample are treated like and are nearly indistinguishable from the non-sample students, except that they are called out of the classroom for interviews at the beginning and end of each unit.

Each student in the sample is interviewed at the beginning of the unit to collect baseline data. The interviews last about 30 minutes and are tape recorded. The first interview each fall includes batteries of questions to inventory each student's general historical background knowledge, to find out how the student defines the term history, and to see to what extent the student identifies empathetically with people who lived in the past. The initial interviews also assess the students' knowledge about the content of that particular unit of instruction. The interviews at the end of the unit probe for changes in how the students define history and whether they identify empathetically with the people they have just studied. These interviews also contain lists of questions to see what students have learned about the unit topic.

The principal researcher [Downey] was present in the classroom every day during which the units were taught. In the Alameda school, he held periodic conferences with students, assisted with the instruction, and observed the students' performance. In the Oakland schools he served as the principal teacher during the 75-minute periods of instruction, with the classroom teachers serving either as a co-teacher or assistant. Throughout the year, he divided his time between the two sites, with each unit taught first at Foothills School and then at Flatland School.

The data collection process included holding initial interviews, keeping track of each teacher-student and student-student conference, noting and, when possible, tape recording each major intervention by the teacher, transcribing the tapes, periodically photocopying the students' work to measure progress, keeping the

folders on each student orderly and up-to-date, and conducting final interviews.

Several kinds of data were collected. They included the following:

1. Baseline interview data
2. Writing products, including drafts of papers and stories
3. Journals kept by the students that describe what they did each day that they were involved in the major writing activities
4. Taped student-teacher conferences
5. Final interviews

The Curriculum

A history curriculum was designed especially for the project. It consists of multi-week units that provide language arts instruction as well as in-depth historical study. It is based on the *California Framework for History-Social Science*, which recommends the study of local history at grade 3, California history at grade 4, and United States history at grade 5. A unit on the native Americans of the Bay Area was developed for the third-grade curriculum. This extended unit began in October and lasted through the following February. It was taught regularly, but not every day, during the morning period devoted to writing workshop. The fourth-grade curriculum consisted of two six-week units, one on the Spanish missions and the development of cattle ranching during the Mexican period and the other on the emergence of an industrial-commercial-agricultural economy during and after the California Gold Rush. Each of the two fifth-grade units will also last six weeks. They probably will focus on the War for Independence and the Westward Movement.

The Classroom Setting

The research takes place in a natural classroom setting in which students are engaged in historical study involving reading and writing activities. The writing activities range from brief exercises in which the students identify artifacts, make brief journal entries or write one-paragraph descriptions to research reports and pieces of historical fiction that require three-to-four weeks to complete. During the period of instruction, the students interact with a variety of historical materials, including trips to a museum or historical site, artifacts in the classroom, primary and secondary sources, photographs, historical fiction, and folklore. The artifacts and print materials are kept at a History Table that serves as a combined classroom museum, archive, and library. The students use the materials to do research for papers and stories. The primary sources, historical narratives, and historical fiction available in the classroom also provide the basis for in-class reading assignments.

The students did some writing nearly every day during the course of a unit, with the emphasis on writing as a practical tool for communication. For example, after a drawing activity in which they depicted what they thought a native American family and its dwelling looked like, the students were asked to write a caption of a sentence or two to help the teacher understand the drawing. For the major writing assignment, students were free, within certain constraints, to select a topic of their choice. It had to be a topic for which the resources at the History Table provided sufficient information. The students either selected a topic, which was then negotiated with the teacher, or they submitted a list of three topics, with the teacher steering them toward the most workable one.

The project's emphasis on historical learning left its stamp on the writing-revision process. A great deal of attention was given to historical authenticity and adequacy of historical detail during the early student-teacher conferences. The phrase used most often during the third-grade unit on native Americans was "does this make Ohlone [the local Indian people] sense?" Making things more historically authentic also helped to clarify meaning. Weeding out unnecessary prose and making story plots more believable were attended to, but they may not have received as much attention as they traditionally do in writing workshops.

RESULTS

Prior Historical Knowledge, Knowledge Acquisition and the Writing Process

A substantial amount of data has been collected at each school site concerning the students' historical knowledge. It consists of responses in the initial interviews to questions designed to find out what students knew about the topic before instruction and to questions in follow-up interviews about broader aspects of their historical knowledge. A second set of data is the historical information embedded in their written work, especially in their major three-week projects. A third bank of data consists of the responses to questions in their final interview. About half of the final interview consisted of questions designed to test in-depth knowledge about each topic. Although much of this data has not yet been analyzed, some tentative observations about the students' historical knowledge can be made.

In the first place, the initial student interviews uncovered information that had not been anticipated about the historical knowledge of third- and fourth-graders and how it is organized. These interviews were designed originally to

establish baseline data about what the students knew about the topic they were about to study, their capacity for historical empathy, and their definition of the word history. However, during the course of the first series of interviews, still another line of questioning emerged related to the students' general historical knowledge. It began as an open-ended question: "What other things do you know about that happened in the past?" The responses fell into a pattern that was sufficiently interesting to warrant pursuing this question farther. At first, direct questions were kept to a minimum for fear of imposing a structure on the knowledge not of the students' own making. As an inventory of volunteered information began to accumulate, it became the basis of a checklist of student-generated names and events. Eventually, additional items were also added to probe topics that had not emerged spontaneously. Finally, all the students were re-interviewed to make sure that all had been asked about all the items on the list.

By the time they reached third grade, the students at Bay School had accumulated a small but important stock of historical knowledge. For the most part, it was information organized around discrete topics. The most frequently mentioned topics were prehistoric dinosaurs and cavemen, Indians, cowboys, Christopher Columbus, Pilgrims, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. It became apparent in January, that Martin Luther King was also part of most students' historical "topical-graphic" map. Most of the students knew something about these core topics or characters, with individual students knowing some things about other topics.

The students' historical landscape consisted of quite well-defined visual images of people and things. Mental pictures appear to be critically important for the students' retrieval of historical information from long-term memory. Images of Indians with long, feathered headdresses and gun-slinging cowboys were sharply etched in their minds, as were images of Presidents Washington and Lincoln. The image of the Pilgrims was also clearly imprinted.

To say that the images were sharply etched does not necessarily mean that they had a high degree of historical accuracy. To the Bay School students, all Indians were modeled after the Plains Indians. They had these mounted warriors of the Great Plains greeting Columbus, having turkey with the Pilgrims, and welcoming the Spanish to California. Guns figured prominently in the students' image of the cowboy, while cattle, branding irons, and lariats were conspicuously missing. Cowboys were perpetually chasing Indians, who, in fact, they seldom if ever saw. In fact, they probably spent virtually of their time looking for strayed cattle, fixing fences and cutting hay. Many of their images were too stereotypical to provide an adequate foundation for building new knowledge upon without a careful examination and refurbishing.

The students identify and describe the people in their historical landscape in terms of their accomplishments and the way they looked. They remember the Pilgrims both for their friendly relations with the Indians and for their distinctive clothing.

> "They had these little things that looked like…a jumper suit. They had long socks, a hat on, and a bib or something. A square thing that might have

been that…. An[d] they had black shoes. Women would have low [long] dresses and a little hat on." (Student G)

All that another student cold remember about the Pilgrims was that they came to this country in ships and wore "weird kinds of hats." Clothing and headdress give both the Pilgrims and the Indians a major part of their historical identity. These are also important components of the students' images of Washington and Lincoln, as the following excerpt from a student interview indicates.

"What did he [George Washington] do?" (Interviewer)

"He was a President, and he chopped down a cherry tree." (Student L)

"What did he look like?" (Interviewer)

"He looked funny." (Student L)

"Funny how?" (Interviewer)

"He had a little braid in back of his hair with his hair all curled up like that [she makes a curling motion] in the front." (Student L)

"How about his clothes?" (Interviewer)

"He wore a suit…." (Student L)

"OK." (Interviewer)

"He wore pretty shoes." (Student L)

"How were the shoes pretty?" (Interviewer)

"They looked like slippers…." (Student L)

"Who else do you know about who lived a long time ago?" (Interviewer)

"Other presidents." (Student L)

"Tell me about other presidents?" (Interviewer)

"I only know about the one with the big hat." (Student L)

"Who was he, the one with the big hat?" (Interviewer)

"Abraham Lincoln." (Student L)

Unusual hair treatments, hats, suits and shoes are impressed on these students' historical imagination.

The students have the people and objects on their historical landscape arranged in chronological order. They know that the dinosaurs and cavemen came first, although there is some confusion as to whether they existed contemporaneously or sequentially. They have the American Indians coming next, followed by Columbus and the Pilgrims. Some students had difficulty figuring out the chronological relationship between the latter two. Most did manage to work through the problem, noting that Columbus discovered the Indians, but not the Pilgrims, which meant that Columbus must fit chronologically between the Indians and the Pilgrims. Washington and Lincoln came later. They knew that Washington was the first president, so he had to come before Lincoln, who was not the first president.

While the students' chronology is derived partly by logical thinking, it is also buttressed by the historical imagery they carry in their mind. The details in their visual images help determine chronological order, especially hair styles, clothing styles, the kinds of dwellings people lived in, and the technology they used. The students know that the American Indians came after the cavemen because they had bows and arrows and tepees. The cavemen used clubs and lived in caves, which means that bows and arrows and tepees had not been invented yet. Despite his big

hat, Lincoln's clothes were more like our clothes today than Washington's clothes, which helps place him between Washington and modern times. Above all else, the past is different from the present in terms of technology, the great historical watershed being the advent of the automobile. There was a time before the automobile and a time after that. Lincoln, Washington, and Columbus all belong to the time before the automobile. The students, their mothers and fathers, and even their grandparents belong to the time after that. Material objects provide much of the framework by which these students impose structure on the past.

The final interview responses indicate that a substantial amount of historical learning did take place during each unit of instruction. About half of the interview was taken up with questions probing what they had learned about the topic. In general, the students acquired an impressive amount of knowledge about Indian life, Spanish mission life, ranch life during the Mexican period and life during the California Gold Rush era. They became well versed in social history. Much of what they learned came from activities that involved writing. The question whether or to what extent the various strands of knowledge can be traced back to the various writing assignments remains unanswered. However, it is possible to track the learning that resulted from their major writing projects, including their research reports and historical fiction papers.

These projects were effective vehicles for historical learning. In the first place, they helped channel the students' natural historical curiosity into sustained three-week learning experiences. The majority of the students were engaged in their topics. The sequence of writing, conferencing, and revising that is central to the

writing process also facilitated historical learning. The students learned not only from their original research, but from questions raised in conferences with the teacher and with other students. Finding answers to their questions required may students to go back to the resources at the History Table to find additional information. The revised drafts included new historical information as well as more clearly written prose. While the students gained in-depth knowledge from these writing activities, they also acquired considerable breadth of knowledge. The latter came partly from students sharing what they had discovered with other students either by reading their work to the entire class or through peer conferences.

Measures of Historical Empathy

The ability to view the world through the eyes of someone who lived in the past is an important measure of historical understanding. It is a challenge that confronts all historians and biographers when they come to grips with the motives and aspirations of the people they are writing about. However, there are different approaches to perspective taking. It can be an abstract, intellectual exercise. It is possible to reconstruct why someone acted as he did without investing much of oneself. On the other hand, perspective taking may also aspire to empathetic identification. The goal of this approach to empathy lies beyond the understanding of motives to the development of a conscious, vicarious personal involvement. It would be knowledge with an affective or intimate dimension. That is, it is understanding with feeling.

Empathetic identification may be the most demanding kind of historical understanding. It requires knowledge about other people and their times as well as

a willingness to identify with them. This kind of historical understanding would have substantial civic value. Empathetic identification would be a useful habit of mind for children growing up in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society. The question is whether it is within the cognitive range of elementary school children? If so, can it be developed or encouraged through history instruction, especially through instruction that emphasizes writing?

While we found no research literature that addressed this question, many of the elementary teachers who were informally surveyed were quite confident that ten-year-olds were capable of empathetic identification. What kind of writing might help develop such ability? It seemed reasonable to assume that the writing of historical fiction had the best prospect for doing so. Students would have to create an historical character and place that character in a problem situation that would evoke feelings of one sort or another. Perhaps this would help them identify with actual historical characters.

At least one of the history units each year involved students in the writing of historical fiction. The third-grade students in Alameda wrote stories about Ohlone Indian children, to which they devoted a total of seven-to-eight weeks. The Oakland fourth-grade students are doing comparable stories for the California Gold Rush period, spending three-to-four weeks on the task. The challenge was to devise a measure for historical empathy that would indicate whether the students were more empathetic toward Ohlone Indians or Gold Rush Californians after the writing activity than before. The measure that was finally settled upon was a series of three

questions included in the initial and final interviews with the students. These were the questions:

1) Did the [historical characters] enjoy living when they did?
2) Would you like to have lived then?
3) Would the [historical characters] enjoy living here today?

The third question seemed to have the most potential for tapping empathetic historical understanding. As it asks the students to consider the possibility that someone else might not enjoy what we enjoy today, answering it negatively seemed to require an empathetic as well as an intellectual leap backward.

One-third of the Bay School students did not think the Ohlone Indians would want to live in Alameda today. The evidence of concern about and caring for people quite different from themselves is striking in their responses. Their reasons revealed a combination of understanding and feeling, as these examples indicate:

> "They wouldn't like it. 'Cause then they would get diseases and people would be killed…. 'Cause like when the Spanish came, there were many people that died." (Student A)

> "They might not know much about the future…. Well, probably they wouldn't want to live now because…. It would probably look weird to them because they never saw like cars, and different houses, and different food, and couches, and stuff like that." (Student B)

> "Maybe not. Because their houses are not like our houses. And they would have streets and cars, and the cars would have gas in them, and they

are not used to that, and pollution…. Maybe there wasn't that much trees, like back then, and animals they would hunt." (Student C)

Altogether, slightly more than half the students either held views similar to these or were ambivalent, seeing advantages and disadvantages for Ohlones who might choose to live in present-day California.

Whether history instruction that involves the writing of historical fiction helps to develop empathetic identification is less clear. Instruction that included fiction writing may have been a major factor in the case of the three students quoted above. When asked the same question during the initial interview, each of them thought that the Ohlones would enjoy living in California today. The idea that they might not enjoy wearing our kind of clothes, living in modern houses, and riding in cars apparently had not occurred to these students prior to the writing assignment. However, although five students who wrote historical fiction demonstrated at least some empathetic identification, seven others who wrote fiction did not. While the role fiction writing played is uncertain, the change in some students' responses suggests that this may be a fruitful avenue for further investigation.

Students' Conceptions of History

Another essential element in historical understanding is the ability to distinguish between history and the past. The past is everything that has ever happened. History, as historians use the term, is knowledge constructed about some aspect of the past. This is an important distinction for students to be able to make. In the first place, the insight that some things about the past may be construed as more important than others potentially shifts the focus of historical learning from

memorization to deciding what is significant about the past and why is it significant? That is an empowering idea, one that can lead students to a more direct involvement in the creative process of making history. It also opens the door to metacognitive learning in which history students become aware of the process in which they are involved when they are learning and creating history. As inviting as this prospect may be, the question remains whether young children can do this and do writing activities help?

The Levstik and Pappas (1987) study cited earlier indicated that young students could make such a distinction. Their sample consisted of twenty-four students, with eight from each of the second, fourth, and sixth grades. The students attended a predominantly middle-class school in a medium sized metropolitan community in the Upper South. Prior to the interview, the students had listened to a historical story, which they were then asked to retell in their own words and to respond to a set of questions, one of which was "What is 'history?'"

Levstik and Pappas found that more than half of the fourth- and sixth-grade students, and nearly half of the second-grade students in their sample defined history as the significant past. That is, they could at least begin to differentiate between the past and what we make of the past. The major determinants of historical significance were that events and people had to be "famous," "important" or "tragic." The second-and fourth-graders dwelled more on tragedy and violence; the sixth-graders were more likely to mention the role of historical events in bringing about important changes. Developmental levels may have been reflected in the criteria students gave for judging significance, but not in their capacity to do so.

The Writing to Learn History Project set out to see if similar results could be obtained within a research design that emphasized writing rather than reading and retelling. Data was collected for each of the three groups of students involved in the project. They were asked to define the term history at the beginning and at the end of each unit of instruction. The student population differs from the Levstik and Pappas students in two important respects. First, there are major socio-economic-ethnic differences. The third-grade students at Bay School come from a predominately working-class neighborhood. The students at Flatland School, a mixed third-fourth grade class, were also from a working-class background and were mostly the children of immigrants from Southeast Asia. The students at the third school, Foothills School, located in a middle-class Oakland neighborhood, are most comparable to the students in the Levstik and Pappas study. Secondly, the California study did not include the sixth-grade contingent involved in the Levstik and Pappas study.

The data collected thus far indicates a very strong socio-economic and linguistic variable in children's ability to distinguish between history and the past. The word history was absent from the vocabulary of the majority of the Bay School students at the outset of instruction. Of the twenty-three students who responded in their logs to the question "What is history?" seventeen could not define the term. Nine left the line blank or responded "I do not know." Eight others associated "history" with the school curriculum, but not as a component of the social studies curriculum. Several students associated the term with science.

> "History is seine [science]."

"Seince."

"I don't know. I think it means learning siense."

"It means siense."

"I think it means art scince."

Only five students related the term history to the past, usually making the two synonymous.

"History means something that happened long ago."

"History is someone who is a star that is old."

"Lrne abote dinusur's."

"It means thing that happed in the pats."

In addition to these log entries, the students in the research group also responded orally to the question. The oral responses were more expansive, but the pattern was the same. Only one student, the most articulate student in the class, even defined history as the significant past.

> "What makes a thing history, then? You just mentioned 'some pretty serious things.'" (Interviewer)
>
> "Well really serious things, important things that changed their future…." (Student J)
>
> "What about mothers and fathers going off to work in the morning and coming back at might? Is that history? Would that be history in the future?" (Interviewer)
>
> "Well if they went to work and Michael Jackson stopped by and asked them if he could use the bathroom, that would be history." (Student J)

"It has to have a Michael Jackson in it, does it?" (Interviewer)

"No." (Student J)

"What makes it history, then?" (Interviewer)

> "It makes it history because it is something exciting that doesn't happen every day…. You know it was history if, you know, my Mom went to work, there would be two million, billion, thousand, million, quadruple, a million, trillion, million things of history happening in just one day. Just think, the Guinness Book of World Records would be stacked with pages up to the moon." (Student J)

During the final interview, twelve of the Bay School students were again asked the question: "What is history?" That was followed by the question: "Is history everything that happened in the past or just some things?" Unclear and inconsistent responses to the second question were followed by various, probing questions until the students settled upon one answer.

This time all of the Bay School students could at least define "history" as something that had happened in the past. But only four of the twelve could go beyond that to distinguish between the past and the significant past. Of the four, two were identified as "high" in academic performance, the other two as "average." Three of the students were native born; one was an immigrant from the Indian Subcontinent. Three of them had a common background as native-born English speakers. The immigrant student was fully proficient in English. Conversely, none of the Limited English Proficient students drew a distinction between history and the past.

The fourth-grade students at Foothills School were much better informed about the meaning of the term than were the third-grade students at Bay School. In the initial interview, all sixteen students in the research sample defined history as something related to the past. Fewer than one-fourth of the Bay School students had done so. Moreover, half of the Foot Hills School students also made a distinction between the past and the significant past or "just kind of" history and "real" history.

At the end of the unit of instruction, the students in the research group were again asked the question, "What does the word history mean to you?" The responses during the final interviews revealed substantial changes in the Foothills students' conception of history. All but six students substantially revised their definition of history. Three who had not made a distinction between history and the past or the significant past in the initial interview did so in the final interview. Seven others, almost half of the research group, came up with a definition of history that had not been mentioned by any student during any of the initial interviews.

This new conception of history essentially defined it as a process of inquiry in which the students themselves were actively engaged. For some, the involvement was minimal, mainly looking up information in books.

> "What does the word history mean to you?" (Interviewer)
>
> "It means looking up things that you don't know about….. Like Columbus, if you do [not?] know about Columbus…. Look up Columbus in your history book." (Student Z)

For others, it meant a more substantial kind of investigation:

"It means stuff that you can learn, stuff that happened long ago…."
(Student D)

"How do you learn these things?" (Interviewer)

"You can learn them out of books, from teachers or museums."
(Student D)

For several students, the process also involved the writing of history:

"What does the word history mean to you?" (Interviewer)

"To learn about things that happened a long time ago." (Student A)

"What do you mean by learn about?" (Interviewer)

"Ah, well, not really learn about, to, ah, get information, maybe."
(Student A)

"Do you want to tell me about what you mean by get information?"
(Interviewer)

"Well to learn something. Or, you know, look in books, you know, put it in your own words, and write things that happened a long time ago."
(Student A)

Or, as another student said:

"It means to me that you're going back in time in all these books, you're going back in time and leaning more about it. And then come back and then you write it, what you learned." (Student C)

And still another:

"You bring it back to learn more about it even though you weren't there." (Student E)

"How do you do that?" (Interviewer)

"Well, you look in books…." (Student E)

"Anything else you do in that sense of bringing it back?" (Interviewer)

"Well you can always write about it." (Student E)

"Do you enjoy doing that?" (Interviewer)

" Yeah." (Student E)

These interviews at Foothills School suggest that history taught through a writing-oriented approach can substantially alter the conception that at least some students have of the subject, bringing it much closer to most historians' perception of history as a process of inquiry and an explanation-seeking discipline.

The question remains whether a writing-oriented approach works equally well for all students. The results from the interviews at Flatland School were not as promising as those at Foothill. In the initial interview, about half (9 of 17) of the Flatland School students did not know what the word history meant, which was comparable to the Bay School third grade. Three students still could not define the term at the end of six weeks of instruction. Fewer students made a distinction between the past and the significant past in either the initial or final interviews than the Foothills School students. None of the Flatland School students arrived at any conception of history resembling the history-as-inquiry definition of the Foothill School students.

The most obvious conclusion from the above data is that many articulate fourth-graders can distinguish between history as a construct and the past as everything that ever happened. The younger third-grade students at Bay School and

the mixed-grade students at Flatland School, both of whom had less adequate language skills, could not do so. The facility with language of the students involved in this study seems to be as closely correlated with socio-economic status than with whether they are native speakers or English language learners. Many of the native speakers at Bay School were as inarticulate as the English language learners at Flatland School. While the more than 40 students included in this study are a small sample, their performance suggests that both age and language facility are critical factors in students' understanding that history is what historical thinkers make of the past.

Do writing assignments help students differentiate between history and the past? This study emphasized writing as the key intervention. Instruction in all three schools emphasized student investigations and writing, with none of the students receiving direct or explicit instruction about the difference between the concepts of history and the past. The answer to the question is a qualified "yes" for the Foothills School students. Nearly half of them at the end of instruction understood that "history" was different from the past, that it involved getting information and putting it into their own words. However, that was not the case in either the Bay School or the Flatland School. These students were, at best, able to understand that history was about the significant past as rather than it being everything that ever happened. As the principal difference between the two groups of students was age and degree of language facility, we can only conclude that writing primarily benefits students who share these characteristics.

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