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Teaching History in the Primary Grades

KATHLEEN GINSBERG, *Teacher*

The School at Columbia

Many years ago, as I was about to embark on designing a third grade history curriculum focused on Native Americans, I mentioned my endeavor to my close friend, Abby. She gasped with excitement and poured out detailed descriptions of her own learning experiences at a revered progressive school in New York City during the early 1960s. She regaled me with stories of beading, weaving cornhusks, foraging for wild plants, making an Iroquois longhouse, and carving arrowheads out of flint. She reminisced about myths and legends, her clan identity, and the famous Iroquois confederacy. I was flabbergasted that she recalled with such great detail what she had learned almost forty years earlier. When I asked her what made her experience so remarkable, she replied, “*I became an Iroquois.*”

Becoming Iroquois

My history education was the antithesis of that of my friend Abby. As a student in a traditional elementary school, I had very few resources available to me besides our textbooks. I fully accepted the historical interpretations presented in those books. For example, I learned that Christopher Columbus bravely and gloriously discovered America. I was neither expected, nor was I encouraged, to question this information, or any other information for that matter.

While my history education was a parade of facts coupled with a mythologized point of view, Abby’s was an immersion in experience and belief. Early on she was trusted to analyze, interpret and construct knowledge based on a wide array of information. She was

asked to identify with the people she studied, which allowed her a vantage point from which she could empathize with their culture and their experiences, both past and present.

Fortunately, over the past few decades, new avenues of thought have emerged relative to the teaching of history. In the seminal book *Rethinking Columbus*, Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson challenge the romanticized view of Columbus, and suggest a more balanced and critical look at the cultural encounter between the European explorers and the Tainos of the Caribbean.

This only makes sense: history is neither a single story, nor a story with just two sides, the “winners” and the “losers.” It is a complex narrative that is very much alive. As human existence progresses, our perspectives change.

History teachers say they cover a country or era. I like to think my students *uncover* a country or era.

For the young child, it is not about building definitive historical knowledge or developing formalized methods of inquiry. It is about bringing the past to life with the sometimes joyful, sometimes painful, but persistent voices of the people who lived in a particular place at a particular time. By experiencing the multiple and multi-layered stories that comprise historical events, children learn to see the past as a complex network of conflicting needs and desires. They begin to construct their own understandings of historical events. And when children can identify with people and ideas from the past, they gain insights into their own lives. History becomes for them the union of the past, the present and the future.

Exploring Culture and Progress

The challenge for primary grade teachers is to identify the specific historical understandings and skills most important for their students. In our school, the K-8 curriculum is organized around grade level concepts, with unifying themes and topics as the con-

texts for learning. The fifth grade team is charged with developing integrated curriculums around the concepts “culture and progress.” The theme is ancient civilizations, specifically those of ancient China and ancient Greece. The various academic disciplines, and the skills specific to them, serve as lenses through which the concepts are investigated.

When it comes to history, we want our fifth graders to develop the ability to think like historians, anthropologists, archeologists, cartographers, historical fiction authors. As they grapple with the complex ideas of culture and progress, the study and evaluation of primary and secondary sources allows them the opportunity to construct historical meaning by making and then confirming hypotheses.

Big Ideas. Essential Questions. Enduring Understandings.

A historical study of ancient China or Greece is necessarily broad and deep. We base our study on a series of big ideas, essential questions, and enduring understandings. The big ideas drive the essential questions, which inform the content and lessons. The ultimate goal is to reach enduring understandings. Some of the big ideas we explore are: What is history? What are cultural values? Essential questions related to those big ideas are: What are the elements of culture? How do cultures change and develop over time? What are the possible ways we express or communicate culture? Lastly, some of the enduring understandings that we work towards realizing are that culture is an expression of the human condition; culture has to be taught; and culture changes over time.

Ancient China and ancient Greece were selected because of their relevance in today’s world. We look at China—the longest continuous civilization on earth, it has survived to be a leading world power—to study its vast cultural and scientific contributions over the last 5000 years. As a contrast, we look at ancient Greece as the cradle of western civilization. Throughout the year students discuss various elements of culture and which aspects of an ancient civilization inform and contribute to modern life. Students compare and

contrast ancient Greek culture with that of ancient China, and are encouraged to find connections between ancient Greek culture and current Western culture. The focus on ancient civilizations asks students to use history as a tool for critically examining their own culture, city and world.

Assembling Historical Narratives

Our classroom lessons and activities are built around discovery. Fifth grade begins with students creating personal timelines of their own lives, outlining what they consider to be the most salient events. Students then learn chronological recording by juxtaposing their life stories with an examination of major world events that took place during those same ten years. They are asked to consider how future generations will make sense of our time, including which events will be considered *historic*.

Similarly, our study of ancient China begins by studying some of the first photographs taken in 1974 of the newly discovered Terracotta Warriors. Students are asked to examine them, make objective observations, pose questions, and reach conclusions. They then delve into the reading of primary source literature, such as Tang dynasty poems and Homeric hymns, as well as respected history trade books. Texts are given the same scrutiny as the primary source objects. Both the primary source literature and the trade books serve as models for writing. As the year progresses, discoveries are assembled into a cohesive narrative.

Opening Doors to Discovery

Early on, our fifth grade students encounter the raw materials of historical understanding: primary sources. As a former museum educator, I place objects at the heart of my students' historical investigations. Using primary sources such as artifacts, traditional literature (myths, legends and fables), historical literature (plays and poetry), and maps, they discover the sequence of unfolding events and understand the human motivations behind them.

They investigate various methods and tools that historians and scientists use to learn about the past, including an in-depth exploration of artifacts. The children are introduced to the work of archeologists and anthropologists and how they uncover and determine the historical relevance of their discoveries.

By the time they visit a museum early in the year, my class is already a functioning group of social learners. They are granted personal freedom and power to explore and make discoveries, usually in partnerships or triads. Prior to the first visit, we discuss the difference between observation and inference, as well as the distinction between subjective and objective conclusions—concepts that drive their interpretations of the objects on view.

At the museum, they are given tasks which require them to piece together their prior knowledge with discoveries made through the close observation of objects. Primary sources—tools, paintings, photographs, documents and letters—are the basis upon which students can best make sense of the past and create a historical narrative. It is objects like axes and chariots, family photos and handwritten letters, necklaces and drinking vessels that speak to young students, and tell vivid stories of those people who created and used them at a particular time and in a particular place.

While secondary sources used in the classroom are valuable sources of information, for the young scholar it is primary sources that ignite the imagination. Rather than just reading an academic's interpretations of past events, students can use these raw materials to develop their own interpretations of data. By testing out theories with each other, young students learn that ideas differ depending on one's perspective. They also learn that any single piece of evidence is insufficient. Multiple pieces of evidence must be gathered and evaluated in order to construct plausible accounts of historical events.

Trusting Students to Evaluate History

History teachers often say that they *cover* a particular country or era in their courses. I like to think, rather, that I help students *uncover*

ancient China and ancient Greece. Through an inquiry-based approach, my students are allowed to construct and analyze historical arguments—just as my friend Abby did, forty years earlier. They learn to recognize that human nature and the human condition drive our behaviors, which have remained remarkably consistent and predictable over time. They realize that our world was built upon the foundations laid by our ancestors. They also appreciate that our present world and, more specifically, their own lives have a place along the continuum of human history.

Eleanor Duckworth, renowned constructivist educator and colleague of Piaget, has noted that the “having of wonderful ideas” is the “essence of intellectual development.” History teachers set the stage for students’ wonderful ideas when we give them the tools and methods of historians and social scientists, then trust them to evaluate, interpret and make sense of their own discoveries. That is how the historical study essential to their growth as scholars and citizens becomes alive and active. And that is how children develop a deep-rooted appreciation of the wisdom and accomplishments—as well as the foibles and failures—of the peoples that came before us.

References

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Kathleen Ginsberg is a fifth grade teacher at The School at Columbia in New York City.