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## Is teaching history reasonable, worthwhile, and beneficial in the elementary grades?

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## Is teaching history reasonable, worthwhile, and beneficial in the elementary grades?

### Abstract

The literature review paper provided reassures the reader that in fact it is beneficial and most importantly, vital to teach historical knowledge to students. Through extensive research, multiple studies confirmed the importance of history instruction in the elementary classroom accompanied with worthwhile, meaningful lessons that allow the students to truly analyze, explore, and internalize the material.

In attempt to provide a quality education for all American students, we must take the following steps: implementing and analyzing more research in regards to history instruction in the elementary classroom; ensure that all educators have an adequate wealth of background knowledge in the area of history; and create and implement a specific national curriculum for all grade levels. When these recommendations are implemented, all American students will hold a plethora of background knowledge that they can apply as they pursue their lifelong dreams and aspirations.

HISTORY INSTRUCTION AT THE ELEMENTARY GRADE LEVELS

Is Teaching History Reasonable, Worthwhile, and Beneficial in the Elementary Grades?

Jill Johnson

The University of Northern Iowa



## Abstract

The literature review paper provided reassures the reader that in fact it is beneficial and most importantly, vital to teach historical knowledge to students. Through extensive research, multiple studies confirmed the importance of history instruction in the elementary classroom accompanied with worthwhile, meaningful lessons that allow the students to truly analyze, explore, and internalize the material. In attempt to provide a quality education for all American students, we must take the following steps: implementing and analyzing more research in regards to history instruction in the elementary classroom, ensure that all educators have an adequate wealth of background knowledge in the area of history, and create and implement a specific national curriculum for all grade levels. When these recommendations are implemented, all American students will hold a plethora of background knowledge that they can apply as they pursue their lifelong dreams and aspirations.

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## Introduction

### *A Concern for Educators*

As our country consistently increases the desire for all teachers to instruct primarily in the area of reading and math, it seems this strong movement could be detrimental to the learning that should prevail in many of the other subject areas. Rest assured, everyone realizes the importance that reading and math will play in every child's future, but in order to ensure that our students become contributing, successful American citizens, they must receive a plethora of historical knowledge at the elementary grade levels. In his book, Cultural Literacy: What every American needs to know, Hirsch (1987) reinforces the idea that as children get older, they fall further and further behind because of their lack of background knowledge. As they slowly digress in their knowledge of history, the vital material that was assumed would have been taught by the conclusion of elementary remains an omitted component in every child's education (Hirsch, 1987). Results analyzed in an article titled, "A nation at risk" (Bennett et al., 1998), found that 20 million Americans graduate high school every year unable to recall key U.S. historical information. The authors as well as our country were astounded by these results and demanded that educators take a stand in the information they teach in the classroom (Bennett et al., 1998). They emphasized the notion that we have American students who are in desperate need of a quality education that provides vital historical knowledge in relation to their future. Not only will this information be the door to every child's future, but also the key that unlocks the door to their dreams (Hirsch, 1987).

The underlying critical concern for our nation is the notion that students from competing industrialized countries are outperforming American students in multiple



subject areas (Sykes, 1995). Although it is quite challenging to compare our students to other nations in the content area of history, it is apparent that other competitive countries require much more knowledge and understanding from their students in the area of history. In his book, Dumbing Down Our Kids, Sykes (1995) reports that “the typical American high school student spends only 1,460 hours on subjects like math, science, and history during their four years in high school. Meanwhile their counterparts in Japan will spend 3,170 hours on basic subjects, students in France will spend 3,290 on academics, while students in Germany will spend 3,528 hours studying such subjects—nearly three times the hours devoted to American schools” (p. 16). In effect, it is vital that we assist our students in becoming future advocates for our country and ensuring its competitiveness in the world. In order for students to be citizens of the United States and help our nation achieve these imperative goals, every child must hold a shared wealth of knowledge in all subject areas to ensure success throughout all of our country (Bennett et al., 1998).

*Does this concern apply to elementary students?* As reflective educators, it is essential to evaluate and analyze statements such as previously stated. Although it sounds essential to teach our elementary-aged students historical information, how can we ensure that teaching history at the primary grades is reasonable, worthwhile, and beneficial? Its logical application towards their future being creates a valid point for history instruction in the classroom, but authors, such as Barton and Levstik (2003) reinforce the notion that memorizing historical facts and dates can be difficult for young students and cause history to remain a complex, unrelated subject area to their everyday

lives. In turn, how can we ensure students will retain this complex information and in effect apply it in a variety of settings?

*Helping address this educational concern at the elementary level.* An abundance of research compiled states the importance of implementing numerous opportunities to allow students to explore, analyze, and interpret the information at hand. Hoge (2003) reinforces this idea in his article, "Teaching history for citizenship in the elementary school", as he states that young children are capable of learning vital historical knowledge. With this key notion in mind, he concludes with the idea that it is vital that all students are given the opportunity to explore, reason, and analyze historical facts and events when learning the information, instead of being taught isolated facts in relation to history (Hoge, 2003). To correlate with Hoge's ideas, Barton and Levstik (2003) enforce the importance of looking past teaching restrictions and instead reinforce the importance of students truly investigating and analyzing historical information to gain lifelong understanding and meaning. If this type of instruction prevails, a plethora of research supports the idea that all students, regardless of age, will have an in-depth understanding of historical knowledge that will assist them in applying that knowledge as they pursue their future aspirations.

In the attempt to provide essential historical knowledge to young children, educators are consistently bombarded with multiple roadblocks that could deter the implementation of history instruction in the elementary classroom. What are the steps that need to be taken to ensure that each student has learned essential historical knowledge by the conclusion of their senior year in high school? There are a variety of essential recommendations and results that will be expanded upon in the closing of this

paper that will take the vital stepping-stones in ensuring a quality education for all students.

In her “Introduction” article, Levstik (2002) reinforces the abundance of research over the subjects of reading and math, but the minimal amount of research in history instruction. In effect, she emphasizes the importance of the implementation of research over teaching of history in the classroom (Levstik, 2002). To accompany this valid point, we find teachers in the midst of feeling inadequate in their own personal background knowledge and we must strive to provide essential learning opportunities for not only students, but teachers as well (Bradley, 1999). If teachers feel confident in the background knowledge they hold, Bradley (1999) reinforces the notion that they will desire to teach students essential content and approach it with an enthusiastic and energetic attitude. Last and most importantly, our country is in desperate need of National History Standards that are specific, sequenced, and shared throughout all grade levels (Hirsch, 1987). In effect, our schools will provide all students with the content knowledge that is necessary for them to pursue any dream or aspiration in life in correlation with being a well rounded, contributing, and educated citizen of the United States.

### Methodology

*What Different Types of Sources Were Researched and Analyzed to Confirm or Reject the Research Question?*

*Maintaining a central focus.* Research is an essential component that must accompany any concern or reflective question that is faced in the classroom. Even though it appears to be logical to implement what you think is an essential strategy or an

important piece of content knowledge while teaching, best practice and implementation follows valid and reliable research.

There is a multitude of research to accompany a variety of topics and although many articles look intriguing and interesting, quality questions accompanied with a central focus assist in finding thought-provoking research. The following questions assisted me in focusing on a specific research topic, as I desired to find helpful answers to the challenging concerns I viewed in our current education system:

- Is teaching history reasonable, worthwhile, and beneficial in the elementary grades?
- What key strategies/methods will assist the students in learning vital historical knowledge?
- What are the steps that need to be taken to ensure that each student has learned essential historical knowledge by the time they graduate from high school?
- What are the proposed outcomes that will result from the implementation of a specific, sequenced, and shared historical curriculum at the elementary grade level?

Although I strongly felt that teaching history was vital in the elementary classroom, my ultimate goal was to compile a large quantity of both primary and secondary resources confirming or possibly rejecting the questions at hand.

*Collecting and studying applicable sources.* Finding and collecting primary resources was a difficult task when many of the articles I found were more of a summary of what they had read and researched in the past, but I did create a goal for myself to ensure a specified amount of primary sources and actual studies as a part of my research. Although secondary sources can assist in confirming my questions, actual studies implemented and discussed would truly allow my research paper to be reliable and valid in the eyes of the evaluative reader. In effect, I provided a plethora of both primary and

secondary sources to ensure the quality of the information provided and strategies that would be implemented in my own classroom and possibility other educators.

In the midst of reading and analyzing a variety of research, it was apparent that teaching history was an essential component of any child's education. A variety of journal articles, research articles on the Internet, and books provided me with this vital component, but how could I ensure in my paper that the students will truly understand the content that needs to be taught? In effect, I sought out to determine what strategies should accompany the instruction of history. Again, a variety of articles, books, and other valid sources provided me with an overlying theme on how history should be taught at all grade levels, including elementary.

*Ensuring the implementation of quality sources.* Both secondary and primary sources are an essential component of any quality literature review or study, but what were some of my own personal criteria when categorizing and sifting through a plethora of research? First and foremost, it is essential to ensure that the authors of both primary and secondary sources are reliable authors in the area of study. Through discussions with many of my professors, I was able to seek out authors that are passionate and very knowledgeable in the area of history instruction. Literature that was written by Barton, Levstik, Hoge, VanSledright, Hodkinson, Hirsch, and Ravitch were ensured to be thought-provoking and well-rounded pieces of research. These authors not only had acquired a deep interest pertaining to the instruction of history, but they had also taken part in a variety of studies to support the ideas that they now held. In regards to primary sources, there are a multitude of other vital aspects that I considered before emphasizing these articles significance in my study on teaching history in the primary grade levels. If

a primary source is willing and ready to identify its form of research and a variety of different components that contributed to that research, such as the history of the events, maturation, testing format, sampling method, and a variety of other essential testing aspects, then it is apparent that many necessary attributes and contributions have been accounted for when performing the research. When it appears that the researcher is attempting to suppress this information from the reader at hand or these vital components were not taken in account for prior to conducting the research, the reliability and validity of these articles quickly decreases and in turn should not assist in verifying the previously stated research questions.

In conclusion, the research and information that I have included in my literature review is a reflection of reliability and validity amongst the researchers and writers. The authors of the sources, methods of sampling, purpose of research, history of the participants, testing methods used, and a variety of other components will be provided for the primary sources I included in my literature review. If I feel there are any unreliable or invalid components of the research, it will be stated in the article's summary to ensure that the reader is presented with all of the background knowledge necessary to evaluate and reflect upon the importance of the research article in regards to the research questions. Even though there are an abundance of secondary sources, they are an accumulation of experts in the field of study and have shown proof of truly researching and studying the topic at hand. In effect, the resources and information provided is in firm correlation with the critical questions I have stated previously.

### Analysis and Discussion

*Is It Appropriate to Teach History to Elementary-Aged Students?*

When researching this vital question, there is an abundance of research that reinforces the idea that all ages of students should be instructed in the area of history. Many researchers have found that not only is it beneficial for students to learn historical information, but the younger the students, the more eager their minds are to learn the vital content. In effect, they are given the opportunity to receive an abundance of information that will assist them in learning new information in the future and increase their chances of pursuing their lifelong aspirations.

*Hirsch's perspective.* In the book, Cultural Literacy: What every American needs to know, E.D. Hirsch (1987) focuses on the decline of teaching content in the classroom and how it has affected our society. Hirsch provides research to prove that our nation is slowly falling behind in the background knowledge that every child holds who receives a high school diploma. Thus, he supports the idea that the increase in shared content knowledge taught throughout elementary school will affect the background knowledge that all children hold as well as the involved citizen they become in our country (Hirsch, 1987).

After agreeing to the idea that all students must receive a shared amount of information through school to increase the quality of their future, he presents some notions on how we as a country can make this happen (Hirsch, 1987). Evidence is showing that students who are disadvantaged fall further and further behind the longer that they are in school. Thus, Hirsch concludes that the early years in school are vital. They are building the firm foundation for the knowledge that students hold and continue to learn. Although many schools are reinforcing a variety of reading skills and attempting to help students read in the primary grades, the students are reaching upper

elementary grades with little background knowledge and thus begin to struggle to understand the material that they are being taught and are reading. Hirsch strongly emphasizes the importance of incorporating and teaching important content when children are young so they have information to pull from, as they grow older. In effect, they would be more engaged, interested, and eager to read material that is of a difficult level. Although teaching facts is often looked down upon in the primary grades, it is a time in which students are eager to take in new information. Their interested minds often soak in the knowledge quicker than expected, and it is our jobs as teachers to feed their eager minds with important cultural knowledge. Then as the students learn information in the primary grades, their road to success will continue instead of deteriorate. In order to have thriving children, Hirsch reinforces the importance of every child learning and understanding their own country's traditions as well as other commonly held background knowledge (Hirsch, 1987).

*Core Knowledge studies.* In correlation with Hirsch's statements, implementation of and research was implemented to truly view the effects that the teaching of historical content can have on young students in a variety of different areas. Thus, the purpose of the study was to confirm Hirsch's previously stated comments in hopes that both academically and socially students can show large gains when learning essential historical content. The research prepared in the article, "Three-year national study confirms effectiveness of Core Knowledge sequence" (Marshall, 1999), is a synopsis over the study conducted by Sam Stringfield, Amanda Datnow, Geoffrey Borman, and numerous other researchers at the Center for Social Organization Schools at John Hopkins University and the College of Education at the University of Memphis. The



purpose of the study was a three-year evaluation over a program called Core Knowledge. This program, which is still used today in numerous schools around the United States, is a sequenced curriculum that provides essential content knowledge in all areas, including history, which must be taught each year. Research was conducted to discover its effectiveness on students' background knowledge attained as well as attitudes towards school and other positive effects after implementing the program (Marshall, 1999).

The quantitative and qualitative research was conducted over a three-year period. There were 12 Core Knowledge schools involved in the study; six of the schools were advanced in the implementation of the program whereas the other six were promising locations where implementation of the program would take place. The students in all 12 of the schools, which were located in a variety of states around United States, ranged in socioeconomic status, with over 50% of the students being eligible for the free lunch program. The qualitative research conducted consisted of a two-person research team that visited each of the schools five times for two to three days throughout the three-year period. As the teams observed, the instrument they used to record information was called the Classroom Observation Measure. Throughout their qualitative studies, the researchers also surveyed teachers in 1997 in all of the grades in all 12 of the schools. The year following, the researchers surveyed teachers teaching third grade through fifth grade because they were a major part of the specific cohort grades being observed. The response results from the survey were 43% for the survey given to all teachers and 84% when presented to the cohort teachers. Thus, the detailed notes and observations taken by numerous researchers as well as the extensive work completed allows the reader to assume that there is much reliability within the results (Marshall, 1999).

Quantitative research was also conducted throughout the three-year period. Students were given the following pre and posttest to evaluate academic effects on students in the Core Knowledge program: the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS/4). The CTBS/4 was split into two smaller subtests where the research team designed Normal Curve Equivalent Scores, which were the Math Concepts and Applications subtest and the Reading Comprehension subtest. The researchers gave the students a pre and posttest every year as well as it was only given to the students who were at the school when the research began. A Core Knowledge Achievement Test was also created in science, language arts, and geography/world civilization/American civilization (Marshall, 1999).

After collecting and analyzing the qualitative research with a variety of researchers, they found that a variety of positive effects were stringing from the Core Knowledge program. The students showed great interest in the material that was being taught and felt comfortable using the knowledge and vocabulary they had retained in their classes. As students' background knowledge grew, their strong desire to seek out more resources on many of the topics prevailed. Other resulting effects were teachers began collaboratively working together on the information they taught as well as parents began strongly supporting the program as they saw their children make large gains in school. All of these positive effects and numerous more were in result of the Core Knowledge program (Marshall, 1999).

After evaluating the quantitative research taken place, the results began to strongly coincide with the qualitative research. The results were showing that in all areas Core Knowledge students were showing large amounts of growth. In the instruction of

social studies/history for the first through third grade, there was an effect size of .48 and was even higher in the third through fifth grade cohort where there was an effect size of 1.13. Other areas, such as science and language arts also showed large amounts of growth. Thus, proving that as the effect size grew over the years that students were in school, much of the information was being retained and becoming a crucial part of their background knowledge. Another data chart that showed an r-value of .50 was proving that the higher implementation of reading and math, the greater NCE gain the students showed, primarily in reading. As studies continue on the effects of the Core Knowledge program, we are left with the notion that students can and are able to understand a variety of difficult subject matter in all areas as well as retain the information and use it as they learn more difficult information, as long as the information builds upon each other in a systematic, sequenced format (Marshall, 1999).

*Barton reaffirms previous findings.* Hirsch's ideas and notions and Marshall's findings strongly correlate with the research conducted by Keith Barton (2002). In his research article titled, "Oh, that's a tricky piece!: Children, mediated action, and the tools of historical time", Barton conducted research to determine if students are truly capable of learning historical content, specifically factual information, such as dates and time periods (Barton, 2002).

Keith Barton conducted a qualitative study on the historical thinking of young students. The main purpose of this study was to determine if students at young ages could handle the introduction of historical events. He was determined to prove that past research conducted on this topic showed that although students could not always relate every event to an exact date, they had a general understanding of its time frame. From

the results he received, his hope was to provide further recommendations for instruction when teaching history in the classroom, regardless of the grade level (Barton, 2002).

The research that was conducted was a qualitative study in Northern Ireland where students were interviewed and questioned about numerous historical pictures and the time frame in which they took place. There were 117 students interviewed in pairs with a total of 60 interviews conducted. The students ranged in grade level from 1<sup>st</sup> grade to 6<sup>th</sup> grade with the bulk of the students being in between the grade levels of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The interviews took place at four schools in rural Northern Ireland where a variety of students with varying economic and religious backgrounds lived. During the interview, the students were shown a set of pictures from the last 200 or 10,000 years. An equal amount of students worked with each set of pictures to ensure that the findings were not based solely on the specific time frame shown. The students were shown a group of pictures and then asked to place in order from the longest time ago to the closest to now. As more pictures were added, the students were required to find the appropriate place for the pictures pertaining to the time in which they happened. They were then asked to explain their thinking on why certain pictures were in certain places. Not only did the researcher conduct 60 interviews with intense, detailed observations, but also he made regular observations within the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms at one of the schools. Approximately 40 hours was spent in the classrooms observing the history lessons that were taught over a 3-month period of time (Barton, 2002).

The results of the research were strongly aligned with the past research conducted by the author, Keith Barton. The primary actions were documented as students were attempting to order the pictures. Primarily, the students used their best knowledge of the

time that the pictures took place to sequence them. Background knowledge about clothes worn and building structures assisted them in creating a sequence. The students also used grouping strategies to find similar and varying characteristics within the pictures to determine the order in which they would be placed. Their knowledge of the past and present and how near or far the pictures took place to the present time period assisted them as they completed the tasks. The results proved that students' understanding was not based solely on specific dates and time periods learned but instead the researcher concluded with some important contrasting thoughts. The idea that students' understanding of historical time is not one single understanding or can only be learned in one particular way was denied through this research. Instead, without actual specific dates presented, students were able to categorize and order a group of pictures based on their knowledge with not only time periods, but also their knowledge of approximate time periods, people, events, and developments during that time. All of these assisted the students in completing the tasks. In conclusion, he stated that students need a combination of instruction in sequencing and dates as well as the historical knowledge that accompanies it. Thus, although younger children may not have the capacity to completely understand exact dates and time periods, they can learn and understand historical events and time periods that can later be developed into exact dates for students to remember and apply (Barton, 2002).

Through the information provided by Hirsch (1987) and Marshall (1999) and the research conducted by Barton (2002), it is apparent that historical knowledge can and should be taught at all grade levels, including elementary. Both reliable authors confirmed this essential notion, but why should this information be taught to young

students? What are the positive effects that will follow the instruction of history at the elementary grade level? In his article, "Teaching history for citizenship in the elementary school", John Hoge (2003) states that history is an important component in a child's education as they become an involved citizen of the United States. In order to maintain the importance of democracy within our country, Hoge (2003) reinforces the idea that it is vital for all future citizens, regardless of their roles in society, to understand its significance and importance. To validate Hoge's ideas, Hirsch (1987) also concludes that students who hold essential historical information and knowledge about our country's heritage will become involved, contributing citizens of the United States.

*What Key Strategies/Methods Will Assist the Students in Learning Vital Historical Knowledge?*

Through the research compiled, it is evident that history can and should be taught in the classroom. Unfortunately, it seems very prevalent in this day and age that history is taught through memorization of facts and lecture format. As Barton and Levstik (2003) emphasize in their article, "Why don't more history teachers engage students in interpretation", our students must be given multiple opportunities to learn, apply, and internalize the vital facts and dates that we desire for them to retain. With the ever-increasing research being performed on the importance of history being taught as well as investigated in the classroom, Barth and Levstik (2003) are reinforcing the importance of this type of instruction in the classroom. In order to meet our goal as educators, to create contributing citizens of the United States, we must teach students valuable historical knowledge as well as help them shape their ideas and perspectives on the way our nation has been formed. Thus, they suggest that we look past our teaching restrictions and

instead reinforce the importance to students of truly investigating and analyzing historical information to gain lifelong understanding and meaning. Thus, what we teach should be strongly accompanied with how we teach.

*Hodkinson finds beneficial way to teach young students historical content.* To reaffirm this idea that students need multiple opportunities to explore, analyze and reflect upon the information at hand to truly retain the content, there has been a variety of qualitative and quantitative research conducted. Taking into account his past research, Alan Hodkinson (2004) decided to do research on primary-aged students' thinking related to historical information. The information he collected on the National Curriculum Standards seemed to show contradicting ideas with the notion that primary-aged students can be taught specific temporal concepts, such as when certain facts in history occur. Although the National Curriculum may find it essential for young children to learn specific temporal concepts, it seems the information presented does not determine whether they can understand, analyze, and interpret this knowledge. Thus, Hodkinson (2004) set out to answer the following research questions about young children's historical learning and understanding:

- Are primary children able to assimilate dating systems?
- Is it appropriate to teach the concept of a century?
- Is subjective, temporal terminology beneficial or deleterious to the development of temporal cognition?
- Does the National Curriculum effectively promote the assimilation of the concepts of historical time?

A combination of both quantitative and qualitative data was collected in order to answer the research questions. The primary data was taken from the quantitative research while the qualitative research was used to ensure the accuracy of the quantitative data. The research was collected from a school located in England. From the school of 435 students, four parallel classes of 8-9 year old students were chosen to participate with an age related control class of 9-10 year old students. Thus, a total of 150 students were involved in the research project (Hodkinson, 2004).

A quasi-experimental multi-method design was chosen for the research. As the research gave a pre and posttest (dependent variables) to all of the groups in four different areas related to the four research questions, all five groups received a variety of treatments or instructions within the classroom. Group A1 in the study received what was called Special Training Method of teaching (independent variable) where essential temporal concepts were taught but were also followed with numerous exploration activities, discussions, and open-ended learning opportunities throughout all three terms. Group A2 received the same Special Training Method for Term 1, but then Term 2 and 3 taught by the Normal Teaching Method where traditional modes of teaching history were used, such as lecture, memorization, etc. Group A3 received the traditional method of teaching throughout all 3 terms. Groups A1, A2, and A3 were all instructed by the researcher where Groups A4 and A5 were primarily instructed through the normal teaching method by their regular teachers (Hodkinson, 2004).

Throughout the study, a variety of interviews were conducted with a random sampling of 5 students from each group. These students took part in interviews that took place during the pre and posttests to further understand the students' thinking. Their



hope was also to use the qualitative data to ensure that it aligned with the quantitative data that was collected. The data that was collected was over four key conceptual concepts: the students' ability to use AD and BC dates, their development of the concept of a century and of temporal concepts which relate to the National Curriculum, and their usage of subjective time phrases (Hodkinson, 2004).

After teaching these main concepts to the students in a variety of modes, the results were amazingly aligned with Hodkinson's original thoughts and rejected the hypothesis that students cannot understand temporal concepts. When comparing the AD Dates pre and posttest of all 5 groups, the greatest amount of improvement was shown in Group A1. Not only did A1 show a large amount of growth, but also both A1 and A2 scored higher than A3 on the final posttest. Qualitative research proved that many students in groups A3 and A4 could understand the concepts when in factual form, but when they were asked to apply this knowledge elsewhere, the interviews showed proof of their surface understanding of the concepts. Furthermore, the BC Dates posttest indicated that Group A1 increased their mean score significantly with a p value of  $<.05$  and outscoring the other groups significantly with a p value of  $<.001$ . The same results were as significant for Group A1 in the National Curriculum Assessment over Temporal Concepts. Continually, the qualitative research compiled correlated with the quantitative data as students in Group A1 could use specific times and dates when discussing terms, such as a long time ago. Students in Groups A2 and A3 had difficulty relating this term to a specific time period and often times related the information to vague terms (Hodkinson, 2004).

The final results to this research state that as found in other research, historical content is essential and must be taught to all primary-aged students. But in order for them to have true understanding of the material and be able to apply and explain their thought processes, students are in need of multiple opportunities to explore, analyze and internalize the information. In effect, Hodkinson states that although the National Curriculum has laid the groundwork for essential historical ideas to be taught in the elementary classroom, it is vital that students are given opportunities to expand on the content being taught in the classroom (Hodkinson, 2004).

*Hodkinson's findings correlate with Barton's prior research.* To reinforce the findings stated in Levstik and Barton's previous article and analyzed in Hodkinson's study, Keith Barton (1997) conducted a study to reaffirm the information provided. His main aspiration was to reinforce the idea that historical information can be taught to elementary-aged students and retained for later use when it is accompanied by multiple opportunities to truly analyze, compare and contrast, and reflect upon historical events and figures (Barton, 1997).

Keith Barton conducted research to conclude students' understanding of historical events. Based upon the research that Barton has studied as well as implemented, his findings have proven that it is vital for all students to receive a variety of opportunities to learn historical information in elementary. Barton took past studies and expanded on the idea of teaching historical events to elementary students. He was hoping to gain further understanding into the application of students' thinking about historical events. His past experiences had proven that although students may have learned the historical events and information necessary for their age, they tend to base all happenings and issues on

specific individuals instead of government economic reasons. Thus, the purpose of his study was to determine if this historical understanding for students was true (Barton, 1997).

There were three techniques implemented to truly investigate the understanding of students' historical thinking. First of all, the researcher engaged in a variety of classroom observations as well as participated during lessons taught. Thus, it was much easier for the researcher to probe questions and analyze students' thoughts when he was actively involved. The researcher also conducted a variety of interviews and analyzed multiple writing assessments assigned by the teacher. The variety of data collection methods used by the researcher as well as the extensive time spent observing and participating in the classroom increased the validity of the researcher's results. Thus, the researcher decreased the chance for sampling error within the study. The data that was collected and then later analyzed was grouped into a set of broad coding categories, which were identified and earlier used by Seixas (1993). All of the information collected from the group of coding categories found were then used to create materials and questions that would be useful for the final interview. All of the previous information was presented and analyzed by the students' teachers to ensure that what the researcher had seen was typical behavior rather than distorted by the presence of the researcher (Barton, 1997).

After compiling the results from a variety of studies and methods used, the data appeared to be very consistent with Barton's prior research. Throughout the study, students quickly learned a variety of historical material from the direct instruction and strategies implemented. Although they gained new knowledge about history, one aspect remained clear about their thinking; they typically explained a variety of events and

information by the use of certain individuals instead of societal influences that were often the reasons for the major historical events they studied. To the astonishment of the teachers, their students' consistent misconceptions often required extensive lessons taught where students still based a variety of results on individuals instead of societal issues, such as the government, the economy, etc. The research then proves that students not only need to be taught about specific historical events, but lessons should also be taught about the role of societal institutions in the relation to historical occurrences and human affairs. These lessons about societal institutions should be accompanied with further opportunities to expand upon and explore true reasons for the events that occurred. In effect, students should leave school with a full understanding of historical events and the multiple factors that contributed to them (Barton, 1997).

*VanSledright justifies both Barton's and Hodkinson's studies.* To reaffirm Barton's studies, another study was conducted by VanSledright (2002) to determine the capacity of which elementary aged students can understand, investigate, and analyze historical events and documents. With his results, he was hoping to prove that the assumption that elementary students are not intellectually mature enough to critically think about the historical past they have learned was incorrect. In effect, he was hoping to share this new notion with educators as well as key strategies that should be implemented in the conjunction with historical content knowledge (VanSledright, 2002).

The research that was conducted by Bruce VanSledright (2002) was a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research. The author had the opportunity to teach American history daily to a class of 23 fifth grade students in a mid-Atlantic state for four months, beginning in January of 1999 and ending in April of 1999.

Although all of the students were from the same school, their backgrounds and abilities varied. Eight of the students were chosen to be in a subgroup where their thinking and analysis of historical events was closely monitored and assessed. The students were conveniently chosen to ensure a range of abilities in school as well as ethnic and socioeconomic statuses (VanSledright, 2002).

The author conducted a pre and post assessment on the students prior to and after the four months of history instruction, which served as the independent variables. During the tests, the students were required to read two documents about an historical event and discuss their findings and reason that certain events happened. Then they were required to compare and contrast the two different documents and their significance. Last, the students observed three images and explained their thinking on the images and again compared them to the documents read previously. In the posttest, the same type assessment was given except on a different historical event. The reason that the event during the posttest was changed was to ensure that students were not only recalling information already stated. To analyze the pre and posttest given, VanSledright designed a coding scheme around Pressley and Afflerback's general coding scheme. In their coding schema, the three following components are used: pulling from prior knowledge, using comprehension-monitoring strategies, and intra-textual evaluation (readers relay judgments of characters' actions, reactions to the text, and questions constructed from the author's word usage). The author then eliminated the prior knowledge portion from the schema, because the students had very little background in the areas being assessed, but he did add two new orders of thinking to the scheme titled event knowledge accretion (students group and compare documents and images to one another) and intertextual

evaluations (judging an image as a piece of evidence against other forms of evidence, evaluating the perspective of the author at hand, and assessing the intentions of the historical writers in the text written in comparison to other texts) (VanSledright, 2002).

After administering the pretest, the results were strongly aligned with the predictions that VanSledright had made. 83% of the students' responses across the assessment used level 1 and 2 thinking, and amazingly 61% of the students used level 1 when explaining their thinking on a variety of the components. Thus, most of the students primarily used comprehension-monitoring strategies to understand and interpret the information at hand. The hope was that students would be able to use level 3 and 4 thinking by the conclusion of the research, which would include corroborating evidence and analyzing and evaluating the characteristics of the events. After conducting and analyzing the pretest given to students, the researcher coded all of the data and put it away for 4 months. The posttest was then given without any reexamination of the pretest given to ensure reliability. Thus, the accurate steps taken by the author produced a coding agreement from the first to the second analysis of 87%. A variety of other vital practices were implemented to increase the reliability of the information presented. The author wrote out detailed lesson plans, videotaped and discussed his conclusions with his research assistant, and kept a daily, detailed journal of the occurrences, insights, and observations in the classroom (VanSledright, 2002).

Throughout the next four months, the researcher had the opportunity to instruct the students in history. Not only were important historical events taught, but VanSledright also gave the students multiple opportunities to analyze and debate the information found in research-based documents. Their research was extensive on a

variety of topics as they learned how to find quality research and determine the difference between primary and secondary sources. Their new knowledge about articles allowed them to analyze the author and information at hand and categorize that information into their pool of knowledge. All of the strategies implemented information, but they could also take part in the analysis of a variety of historical documents and events (VanSledright, 2002).

After four months of instruction, VanSledright reassessed the eight students as they engaged in the post performance task. Through observations and documentations, it appeared that all 8 students were able to use level 3 and 4 thinking about the information at hand. Intertextual comments (Level 3 and 4 thinking) pertaining to documents and pictures presented went from 17% all the way up to 41% in the final performance task. Thus, the students showed a large improvement on their thinking about historical events. Their reliance on comprehension-monitoring strategies was still evident. However, as their knowledge on the subject increased, their willingness and confidence with using intertextual thinking increased as well. Their past knowledge about point of view allowed the students to critically think about the document written and the analysis required to interpret that time period. Thus, the author concludes that his research is supporting the idea that in fact elementary students are not only capable of learning historical facts, but they are also skilled enough to take the information to a whole new level as they analyze its significance in not only their lives, but also in other historical events and documents. In effect, he reinforces the idea that students should be given multiple opportunities to explore, analyze, and reflect upon the historical content that has

been taught in order for them to truly understand and apply the knowledge learned in the future (VanSledright, 2002).

It is a proven notion from the research provided that historical information, events, and figures must be instructed to elementary-aged students. In order for the students to truly understand and later apply the newly acquired content, numerous researchers emphasize the vitality of providing students with a plethora of opportunities to later analyze and truly explore the dense knowledge. In my own experiences with students and discussions with expert teachers in the field of history, I personally have seen how enthralled and enthusiastic young students are when being taught historical information. Often times, they have a feeling of adequacy and confidence when they can share complex information with their family and friends. Unfortunately as many of the researchers state, they may appear to enjoy learning the vital information, but with very minimal opportunities to truly analyze and reflect upon the vital historical knowledge, they too often have lost the information when asked to later apply what they have learned. Thus, we must generalize the importance of providing students with ample opportunities to apply the information they have learned to their prior knowledge, newly learned information, and the unique lives that they hold.

#### Conclusions and Recommendations

*What Are the Steps that Need to be Taken to Ensure that Each Student has Learned Essential Historical Knowledge by the Time They Graduate From High School?*

The research has strongly declared that students are in dire need of receiving essential historical content. Although it seems prevalent, why haven't we begun implementing this vital knowledge nationwide? There are a variety of steps that must be



put in place in order to create a stairway towards the instruction of history at all grade levels.

*More research implemented in regards to the teaching of history at the elementary grade level.* Although there are research articles to verify the importance of history instruction at the elementary grade levels, it is prevalent through hours of research that there is still more research to be done. The “Introduction” article written by Linda Levstik (2002) presents more research conducted on the subject of teaching history as well as social studies in elementary. Throughout Levstik’s research, she continually found studies to support the idea that teaching history in elementary is quite reasonable as well as vital. Although these findings have proven the importance of teaching history in the primary grades, research also shows that an abundance of research over reading and math have slowly taken over the instruction of social studies, including history. Levstik’s main purpose for seeking out these resources is to determine the importance of teaching history as well as the methods that should accompany this instruction. In effect, she strongly encourages knowledgeable persons in the area of history instruction to conduct and analyze the effects that the teaching of history can have on young students. Even though educators will continue (as we desire them to) to view math and reading as beneficial subject areas, a continued push supported by reliable and valid research towards the consistent instruction of history may cause them to truly evaluate the instructional time allotted to each content area (Levstik, 2002).

*Knowledgeable history teachers at every grade level.* Another consistent barrier that educators face today is their own personal background knowledge. In their article, “Why don’t more history teachers engage students in interpretation”, Barton and Levstik

(2002) reinforce the notion that teachers who feel confident in their historical background knowledge make time to teach this vital subject area. Unfortunately in education today, lack of background knowledge and incompetence in a specified content area may cause a teacher to minimize the instruction of that subject area in his/her classroom (Barton & Levstik, 2002).

In order to eliminate the detrimental thought that certain students may be given minimal if any instruction in the area of history, Bradley (1999) emphasizes the importance of ensuring that every teacher has the necessary background knowledge to teach the essential historical content to his/her students. From the 297 surveys collected in Quebec, over 40% did not have an extensive amount of historical background knowledge and felt incompetent when teaching this vital subject area (Bradley, 1999). Sykes (1995) reiterates the same challenge that the United States faces. Although our desire is for all educators to hold a well-rounded wealth of knowledge in all of the subject areas, Sykes (1995) resides to the idea that many educators in fact are not even concerned about the background knowledge they hold. In his book, Dumbing Down Our Kids, Sykes (1995) states that our "schools are caring environments, to be sure, peopled with earnest and sincere young pedagogues who may be unclear about the details of history, literature, or science" (p. 88). In the midst of attempting to ensure a quality education for all students, especially in the area of history, we must provide all of our educators with multiple opportunities to learn the vital content that they will need to teach. Not only will it assist them in instructing their students in the area of history, but it will also provide educators around the nation with the background knowledge necessary to be enthused and excited about what lies in our past and what we hope will lie in our country's future.

What can we do to ensure all educators have the valid background knowledge to teach the essential historical knowledge to their students? First of all, regardless of major, I find it vital for all bachelor's programs to provide essential courses on history and a summary on historical knowledge learned in elementary, middle school, and high school. The reviewed courses in the area of history will assist in providing the motivator for all educators to teach history to their students. When college students become educators, it is essential that we consistently provide required in service courses and workshops that require teachers to recall and apply the historical knowledge that they will be teaching to their students. The consistent implementation of mandatory history quizzes and tests will assist the teacher in realizing areas that need to be revisited and studied in order to provide a wealth of background knowledge for his/her students. Finally, as all schools provide curriculum manuals, I feel it is essential that all schools purchase history manuals that not only provide teaching activities and ideas, but also a review on the content being taught. In effect, the teacher has a plethora of knowledge to pull from and in result will feel competent in the instruction of this critical subject area.

*Specific, shared, solid and sequenced National History Standards accompanied with a curriculum.* One ever-increasing concern in the instruction of history is the inconsistency and irregularity in its delivery. While one school may provide consistent instruction in the topic of George Washington, another may find it more prevalent to teach about the Civil War. Unfortunately, we assist in the production of high school graduates who contain many gaps in their historical knowledge. Their understanding of the events is minimal and in turn their interest towards learning more historical information slowly decreases (Hakim, 1995). In effect, Levstik (2002) emphasizes the

importance of teaching history to students in a systematic, sequential format in an attempt to avoid the repetitive yearly units. Hirsch and Holdren (1996) reinforce the same notion in their book, What Your Kindergartner Needs to Know. The only way that students can learn new information is by building upon what they already know. In effect, we must provide them with a specific, shared, sequenced, and solid curriculum that will allow them to build upon the prior knowledge that they hold (Hirsch & Holdren, 1996).

The only way to ensure that all students of the United States are given this ample opportunity at a sequenced historical curriculum is to create and implement a national curriculum. Although it may appear to be a far-fetched, unrealistic dream, National Standards have already been created in the area of history. Hoge (1994) elaborates on these standards in his article, "Achieving history standards in elementary schools". The established history standards provide the basis for requiring all educators to teach students vital historical knowledge. Even though it is encouraging to realize that we have something to refer to, many researchers have found faults in the standards created. Both Ravitch (1999) and Hirsch & Holdren (1996) emphasize the importance of truly specifying what the child needs to learn at each grade level. If we continue to have vague standards, such as in grades K-4, "the student understands how the United States government was formed and the nation's base democratic principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution" (Ravitch, 1997, p. 30), the background knowledge of our students will continue to contain multiple gaps in the area of history. As anyone can imagine, every educator can and will interpret this standard as they please. In accordance with its interpretation, the grouping of grade levels only provides more room for repetitive teaching and lack thereof.

In an attempt to provide all children, regardless of their diverse needs and abilities, with a quality education in all subject areas, we must realize the vitality of creating and ensuring implementation of a specific, shared, sequenced, and solid curriculum throughout our nation. In effect, the prior knowledge that the children hold will allow them to learn the newly taught historical knowledge. Their wealth of knowledge will carry through as they learn more information in middle and high school (Hirsch, 1987).

Implementing a nationwide curriculum will be very difficult, but I feel it is essential in providing a quality education for all children. In accompaniment with the specified content that needs to be taught, it is vital that students are provided with meaningful opportunities to learn, explore, and apply their newly learned knowledge. Thus, a curriculum that builds upon one another would easily lend itself to these particular requirements. Sewall (2000) reinforces this idea in his article, "Lost in Action: Are time-consuming, trivializing activities displacing the cultivation of active minds?". He explains that we must start teaching important content knowledge in correlation with well-planned and essential lessons that require children to listen, interact and discuss the different aspects being taught, and leave the classroom knowledgeable and enthralled by the content that was learned throughout the day (Sewall, 2000). In an attempt to meet this important goal, it is essential to create a variety of engaging, meaningful, and historical content-filled lessons for each grade level. To begin this difficult task, I hope as an educator to construct a history curriculum plan for my kindergarten students. The content will be based out of the book, What Your Kindergartner Needs to Know (Hirsch & Holdren, 1996) while the activities to accompany the content will be taken from a

variety of resources. My ultimate goal would be to have a specified curriculum plan for each grade level that contains a set amount of content in conjunction with meaningful and applicable lessons. The hope of many is that at the completion of elementary, all students will hold a strong wealth of knowledge in the area of history and be able to build upon that knowledge as well as analyze and explore a multitude of historical content in middle and high school.

*What Are the Proposed Outcomes that will Result from the Implementation of a Solid, Specific, Sequenced, and Shared Historical Curriculum at Each Grade Level?*

Implementing a nationwide curriculum where all teachers are required to teach historical content at each grade level that specifically, purposefully builds upon each other will provide more benefits than our country can imagine. Although the implementation and results would take some time to take effect, the hard work and extra effort would be invaluable compared to what our country, as a whole would achieve.

*Strong communication amongst all individuals.* All people of our nation, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity would hold a strong wealth of knowledge to truly share with everyone who surrounds them. In his book Cultural Literacy, Hirsch (1987) emphasizes the importance of breaking those knowledge barriers that now stand firm and tall in the midst of young and old. “We will be able to achieve a just and prosperous society only when our schools ensure that everyone commands enough shared background knowledge to be able to communicate effectively with everyone else” (Hirsch, 1987, p. 32). In order to have a group of American people who are able to partake in strong communication between one another, we must strive to provide a wealth of historical knowledge to all students who enter our schools.

*Pursue any lifelong aspirations.* As American people are able to communicate between one another and relay information that they have learned in school in a variety of different settings, their opportunities in life will drastically soar into once unrealistic dreams. Unfortunately in our world today, we have children who come from diverse settings. Under the assumption that they cannot pursue dreams that other students can, we tend to decrease the amount of content and information presented to these students (Hirsch & Holdren, 1996). In effect, the students who are most in need of the vital knowledge are deprived of the one chance they may have had to receive a quality education and pursue dreams that they once thought impossible. We must give all children, regardless of their background, the one opportunity to achieve the dreams that they once thought unattainable (Hirsch, 1987). As inspirational and motivational educators, shouldn't it be our deepest desire to assist all children in gaining a quality education so in turn they can apply that knowledge as they pursue the challenging goals they yearn for?

*Competing to provide a quality education for all students.* Last and most importantly, in the midst of many up and coming industrialized countries, don't we as a strong, confident country desire the best for all of our students? If the answer is "yes", then the historical background knowledge that we can provide for our students will only provide them with the heritage and ancestry they are in need of to become contributing, involved citizens of our country. When we give students the historical knowledge that is part of the country that they live in, we place in their arms "the heritage that is rightly theirs" (Klee, 1992, p. 3). The inspiring outcome that will occur in our nation will be mass amounts of people rising up in hopes to provide even more for their children's

future from knowing and appreciating what wonderful opportunities their ancestors have prepared for them.



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