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## Using Cultural Universals and Images to Develop Temporal Distinctions in Kindergarten-Aged Students: An Action Research Study

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*This action research project traces how a teacher used images of cultural universals as part of a kindergarten social studies curriculum to help her students develop temporal distinctions between past and present. Students were introduced to the general idea of what cultural universals were, and then they studied two different periods of history using cultural universals. After clearing up some initial misconceptions, the majority of the students were able to make at least a dichotomous distinction between past and present, and many students were able to make additional temporal distinctions among periods of the past.*

### Introduction

The teaching of history in the primary grades (K-3) has been a source of debate in recent decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers began questioning the commonly adopted scope and sequence known as *expanding horizons/environments*. This scheme began in the primary grades with the near and familiar and then expanded to the distant and unfamiliar in subsequent grades. Akenson (1987) and LeRiche (1987) argued that this curricular sequence could be traced to the outdated, racist theories of the cultural epochs and recapitulation (i.e., ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny). Levstik and Pappas (1992) suggested that expanding horizons was based on misguided, Piagetian notions that history was too abstract for young children to understand. Ravitch (1987), Crabtree (1987), and Egan (1980) used the expanding horizons sequence to attack the underlying assumptions of the social studies itself — dismissing it as *tot sociology* and/or mere *socialization*. Despite these different perspectives, by the early 1990s, most

theorists and researchers had reached a near consensus that expanding horizons was no longer an appropriate curricular framework for elementary age students. However, they have not come to consensus about what should take its place.

Brophy and Alleman (1996) argue that in the place of the expanding horizons curriculum, the elementary social sciences should be integrated and centered on powerful ideas and cultural universals such as shelter needs, clothing, or habitat. Egan (1989) argues that content should be delivered in the form of stories and myths with easily discernable dichotomies such as good/evil. Ravitch (1987) and Crabtree (1989) argue that elementary students should learn historical content in the form of fables, myths, legends, and stories about famous Americans which are meant to lay the foundation for future study in history. Levstik and Barton (1997) and Barton (2002, 1997) suggest that teachers should use historical images to overcome historical and temporal misconceptions.

The Commonwealth of Virginia, where this action research project took place, had largely adopted the Ravitch-Crabtree approach. In Virginia, elementary students are tested for the cumulative acquisition of historical content knowledge via multiple-choice tests in the third, fourth, and fifth grades. This differs from many states in which social studies content has been driven out of the curriculum to make room for remedial work in reading and math due to the pressures of No Child Left Behind (Rock et al., 2006; VanFossen, 2005). While the inclusion of the social studies in the Virginia testing regiment has had a beneficial effect on the coverage of social studies content, it has also posed a challenge. With additional testing in the elementary grades in mathematics, writing, reading, and science, elementary teachers are left with little room for curricular experimentation and flexibility (Fore, 1998). Thus, the content of the social studies in the primary grades is largely dictated by the fact-based, standardized curriculum. As a result, it can be difficult for teachers to center units on powerful ideas and cultural universals, as suggested by Brophy and Alleman (2007, 2006a, 2006b), when they are expected to cover the material for the test.

Nevertheless, we suggest that carefully designed social studies instruction can both cover the requisite information for the standardized tests, as well as create powerful, meaningful knowledge for young students. This action research study traces how the first author, Ms. Tiemann, used images of cultural universals to develop temporal distinctions in her kindergarteners. Specifically, she explored whether using images of cultural universals from the present and different periods of the past would allow her students to conceptualize the past as consisting of different periods, thus developing an appreciation of change over time. To our knowledge, the current study is the first ever classroom-based study of developing temporal thinking with such young students. The objective of the action research study is not only to confirm that Piaget's theory about the limita-

tions of young children is incorrect, but also to demonstrate how the Ravitch-Crabtree approach to elementary history is not necessarily incompatible with the progressive approaches proposed by Brophy and Alleman and Barton and Levstik.

### Conceptual Framework

Recent empirical research demonstrates that young children can be introduced to historical content. Brophy and Alleman (2007, 2006a, 2006b,) argue that young students are able to learn about history if the information is presented through cultural universals they experience in their everyday lives. Barton (1997) confirms that young children are able to take their present knowledge about objects and how things like technology have changed over time and apply this knowledge to learning new content. Cooper (2002, 1994) demonstrates that young primary students are able to make observations about artifacts, make connections to objects in their lives, and reach conclusions about the time from which certain artifacts came.

According to a study by Barton and Levstik (1996), children in kindergarten were able to make basic distinctions between past and present in photographs and were able to draw on prior knowledge to arrange historical images chronologically. Specifically, the youngest children in the study (age six) employed both effective methods (drawing on previously learned facts and personal experiences) and ineffective methods (ignoring discrepant photos and looking for examples of linear progress) in trying to determine the order of a set of historical images. These results show that kindergarten-age students make a basic dichotomous (now and then) temporal distinction and can apply previously learned information to new situations. However, young children do not yet have a true sense of what *historical time* is, and dates hold little meaning for them. This does not mean that kindergarteners should not learn about history. Instead,

Barton (2002) argues, instruction should focus on learning about history through methods using more concrete information such as pictures and artifacts. This supports Thornton and Vukelich's (1988) developmental historical time viewpoint which asserts that certain historical time and history concepts are within the limits of young children, but these concepts need to be developed systematically and sequentially by the teacher. They suggest historical time concepts should be taught in conjunction with history.

Furthermore, Levstik and Barton (2005) argue that history is typically taught from a single perspective — particularly of those in power — and marginalizes other ethnic and gender groups. Children have little connection to this type of history and so have a difficult time processing the information. Levstik and Barton insist that students should be given the opportunity to investigate historical information and topics that have meaning for them. For older grades, the authors recommend spending as much time as possible studying events for which students have personal connections such as immigration. This allows the students to see that social studies is relevant to their own lives. This idea can be extended to younger students by focusing on cultural universals.

Early elementary age students have the most experience with their home, families, and other activities that are a part of their daily lives. Using these cultural universals in conjunction with carefully selected images can serve as a stepping-stone for learning about other individuals and events from the past and can allow students to gain a deeper understanding of that information. According to Brophy and Alleman (2007), studying cultural universals enables students to gain a better understanding of the cause-and-effect relationships. Cultural universals are domains of human experience that have existed in all cultures, past and present. They are made up of basic human needs including food, shelter, and clothing. All societies (past and present) have

cultural universals, but they imbue them different meanings. These similarities and differences make centering a social studies unit on a specific cultural universal an ideal way to engage students by drawing upon their prior knowledge and extending it into new domains. However, Ravitch (1987) argues that students do not need instruction in cultural universals because they learn about it through everyday living. She advocates teaching students chronological history that focuses on famous individuals — an approach more or less adopted by the Virginia standards of learning. In refutation, Brophy and Alleman (2006a) argue that students have a great deal of exposure to cultural universals, but at early ages, they still have many misconceptions about how these universals work in their own environment and others. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that these two lines do not need to be viewed as incompatible.

Three important cultural universals are shelter, family life, and clothing. Young students have a basic understanding of shelter, coming first from their experiences with their own home. They can draw upon this when learning about the types of shelter groups of people used in the past. When Brophy and Alleman (2006a) asked young students (K-3) to compare two different forms of housing used by different Indian tribes, the majority of students provided limited answers to this question and could not make connections between the housing material and the geography in which the Indians lived. A common theme present within the students' answers about shelters from the past was their noting the limitations and problems with the shelters instead of understanding that the shelters were the best forms people could construct with the knowledge they had at that time. These findings demonstrate the need for instructing students on the impact of geography, history, and culture on the type of homes they construct.

Children have fewer misconceptions about the cultural universal of clothing than they do for shelter. This, according to Brophy and

Alleman (2006a), is likely due to the fact that information about clothing is less complicated than other cultural universals. Although children have a basic understanding of what clothing is, most do not have a firm grasp of the multiple roles clothing can play. Children often believe the only function of clothing is for protection from the weather. They have not yet been exposed to the idea that clothing can have cultural significance or can identify an individual's job or social status (Brophy & Alleman, 2006a). By the time students enter elementary school, most have some say in what clothing they wear to school each day, and some may assist in choosing the clothing they wear from a store. Young children enjoy playing pretend and dress up games in which they use clothing to assist in creating imaginary characters.

In summary, according to the research of Brophy and Alleman (2006a), students typically have a great deal of background knowledge about cultural universals and thus can use it as a basis for learning about new unfamiliar topics. This helps students gain a deeper understanding of the topic and reduces many misconceptions students hold about information they have not formally learned. According to Barton and Levstik (1996), historical images of social history are an effective tool to develop rudimentary levels of temporal distinctions between the present and periods of the past and understanding of historical change. In this action research study, Ms. Tiemann combined these two approaches by using images (paintings and photographs) of cultural universals as the basis for teaching a unit on famous Americans, covering George Washington, Betsy Ross, and Abraham Lincoln — topics dictated by the Virginia standards of learning. She investigated whether — in the diverse, high stakes-testing, public school environment of her Virginia classroom — focusing on images of cultural universals would enable her students to develop greater temporal distinctions.

## Methodology

The following case study was derived from an action research project that was implemented in spring 2008 during the student teaching experiences of Ms. Tiemann. Action research, according to Reason and Bradbury (2001):

is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes ... [that] seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. (p. 1)

Action research is practitioner-based. McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (2003) suggest that action research “recognizes knowledge not only as an outcome of cognitive activity, but also as embodied; that is, mind and body are not perceived as separate entities but integrated... knowledge exists as much ‘in here’ as ‘out there’” (p. 17). The objective of action research in educational settings is to capture the process of how the act of teaching evolves in response to the perceived reality of the practitioner(s) in a particular context. The findings are not meant to be generalizable; they simply suggest the possible as presented through and reflected upon by the meaning perspective of the action researcher.

Ms. Tiemann's action research project was designed and implemented in consultation with her advisor, the second author. The second author neither participated in the action research nor collected any data; data collection was done exclusively by the first author, Ms. Tiemann. The authors worked together on data analysis. The second author met with Ms. Tiemann weekly during her student teaching experience to discuss the progress of her project and to offer suggestions. Ms. Tiemann also received additional suggestions and advice from her host teacher. However, during the

duration of the action research project, Ms. Tiemann engaged in full teaching responsibilities.

The study was conducted in a suburban elementary school located in East Central Virginia. There were eight boys and twelve girls in the class ( $n = 20$ ). Five of the students were African American and one was Hispanic. Two of these students received special services for learning disabilities. At the time of the study, 23% of the students in the school were eligible for free or reduced lunch, and the year prior to the study, the school did not achieve its Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). This resulted in an increased emphasis by administrators upon skills and content of math and reading which had the greatest impact on upper grades (3-5) in which students take end-of-year tests, but it impacted the lower grades as well, because teachers were pressured to devote more time to instruction in math and language arts. In kindergarten, social studies typically received a limited amount of attention because emphasis was focused more intently upon teaching early reading and math skills. Social studies instruction occurred approximately 40 minutes in the late morning (on alternating days with science instruction). The action research took place over two weeks.

The research focused on using cultural universals to present three distinct periods in history (i.e., temporal distinctions). Ms. Tiemann introduced cultural universals to provide students with a concrete example through which they could make connections to abstractions of the past. Her unit of study incorporated images and discussions of cultural universals (including transportation, clothing, and shelter) so that students were given a variety of universals with which to make connections and observe.

The Virginia curriculum states that students in kindergarten will recognize and describe the famous Americans of George Washington, Betsy Ross, and Abraham Lincoln. They are also to recognize that things change over time. Following the prescribed curriculum, Ms. Tiemann centered her unit on devel-

oping temporal distinctions among the 1700s, mid-1800s, and the present day. Throughout the implementation of her unit, Ms. Tiemann daily collected anecdotal notes in which description was interspersed with analysis. In addition, Ms. Tiemann interviewed six selected students at the beginning and the end of the unit and collected and analyzed various assessments throughout the project, including student drawings and assignments (explained below). These six students were selected to represent a cross section of the ability and achievement levels of the class. The activities are further described below, but the sequence of events was as follows: (a) the six students were first interviewed; (b) Ms. Tiemann led a class discussion; (c) the students completed a collage activity; (d) Ms. Tiemann led a class discussion; (e) the students engaged in a sorting activity; (f) Ms. Tiemann led a class discussion; (g) the students completed a drawing activity; (h) Ms. Tiemann led a class discussion; (i) the students completed a second drawing activity; (j) the students were all asked to explain the contents of their drawings; and finally, (k) the same six students were interviewed again. Based on analysis of the anecdotal and interview data, Ms. Tiemann constructed a schematic continuum of temporal understanding and placed her students at the appropriate levels.

### **The Famous Americans Unit**

During the initial assessment, Ms. Tiemann interviewed six students about their basic knowledge of cultural universals and events that occurred in the past. She showed students pictures of objects from the past and present — a black-and-white drawing of a horse and carriage, a colored photograph of a modern automobile, a black-and-white photograph of candlestick, and a colored photograph of a modern lamp — and asked the students to tell her when they thought the picture was from and explain their reasoning. She also had them explain any other observations they had made about the

picture. She asked students to group the pictures into categories based on whether or not the people from the time of the picture would have been able to use them (see Appendix B). She repeated this same procedure for the final assessment using different pictures — a black-and-white drawing of a Colonial family at the dinner table, a black-and-white drawing of caldrons over a fire, a colored photograph of a computer, and a colored photograph of a modern stove. In Barton and Levstik's (1996) study, the authors deliberately and consistently used black-and-white photographs in their performance tasks. In contrast, Ms. Tiemann included colored paintings, black-and-white drawings, black-and-white photographs, and colored photographs as a way to create additional temporal distinctions among the images beyond the salient clues in the pictures themselves. According to Fallace, Biscoe, and Perry (2007) in their study using images and a timeline with second graders, the use of different kinds of media helped second-grade students further develop the desired temporal distinctions in the past because they could recognize and correctly sort changes in the media, even when they could not necessarily recognize changes in the clues of the images themselves.

As an introduction to cultural universals, Ms. Tiemann taught the class a lesson on different forms of clothing that people wear today and the reasons they wear them. Students were instructed to create collages of clothes in which they could play. Ms. Tiemann had cut out and distributed dozens of images of children's clothes from magazines. Although her students had looked at different photographs of clothing and discussed why people wear different kinds of clothing, not all of the collages demonstrated clothes that are typically considered play clothing (see Appendix, Picture A). Many of the students could not distinguish play clothes from dress clothes. Instead, they considered it appropriate to play in any form of clothing. After reflecting on this lesson, Ms. Tiemann concluded that many of the students in the class needed a visual way to organize

information to be able to understand distinctions among the categories of data.

Originally, she had planned to teach additional lessons on cultural universals from the present but was unable to do so due to time constraints. If there had been more time, these additional lessons would have added to the students' understanding of the difference between past and present by exploring more cultural universals such as transportation and habitat. Instead, she integrated portions of these lessons into the famous Americans unit.

After teaching the lesson on cultural universals, she realized that simply looking at and discussing the historical pictures was not enough to aid in the students' understanding of the differences between past and present as well as different periods from the past. As a class, she added a sorting component to the lesson as a way of addressing their misconceptions. She showed the students pictures of cultural universals from today and from the period of the individual they were studying. She then instructed students to sort the examples into categories based on the period from which they came (see Appendix, Picture B). Sorting was an attempt to aid the students in understanding the differences between the various periods of history through a hands-on activity. The activity successfully cleared up some of the misconceptions held by the students and helped most of them gain a better understanding of the differences between the present time and the historical time they were studying.

For example, one picture used during the sorting activity was that of a horse and carriage. The students were shown the picture as they were learning about George Washington. After giving the class time to think about what category the image belonged in, one student was called on to put up the picture. After each student placed the image on the chart, Ms. Tiemann asked her or him to explain why she or he had made that selection. During the first part of the unit on George Washington, students only had to decide whether an image could fit in the past (the time of George Wash-

ington) or the present. Students were aided in their thinking by the fact that there was no electricity during Colonial times, so students could be prompted to think about whether or not the object pictured required electricity.

The sorting activity was particularly helpful in identifying and clearing up student misconceptions in their studying about Abraham Lincoln. While teaching about Lincoln, Ms. Tiemann attempted to show students that this was a different time than when George Washington was alive. After an introduction to Lincoln through an informational book and class discussion, the students repeated the same procedure for sorting pictures as they did with pictures of George Washington. When students exhibited uncertainty sorting the pictures, she attempted to explain differences between objects used primarily during Lincoln's time (such as traveling on a train) and those used today. She did not show students any objects from Washington's time at this point in the unit. After noticing that some students had more difficulty sorting objects in this new period, she looked for objects from the present of which students would have a personal connection. In one instance, she took a picture of the class using a digital camera and then had the students compare this photograph with a black and white image of school students from the 1860s. The students discussed the differences in how the two pictures were taken (i.e., the digital one was taken and developed quickly, but it took much longer to take and develop photographs during Lincolns' lifetime). In subsequent lessons, many students remembered this discussion and mentioned it as one of the differences between Lincoln's time and the present day.

After getting a baseline of what information students already knew, Ms. Tiemann introduced the famous Americans that students are expected to be familiar with through historical images. For each famous American, she read the class a carefully-selected short picture book. Ms. Tiemann only selected books that did not contain cartoon drawings or etchings of

the individual because she believed this would have confused her students. Instead, she selected books with appropriate, contemporaneous, historically accurate images (i.e., paintings and/or photographs) and/or she only showed the students images that fit with the media available at the period being studied (i.e., paintings of people from Colonial times, black and white pictures of people from when Lincoln was alive, etc.). She then led a class discussion about the various cultural universals from those specific time periods during which students could ask questions. Their questions about the cultural universals brought up many misconceptions about the way events occurred in the past. This included the idea that people in the past were not able to purchase modern-day objects because they were poor as she reflected in her anecdotal notes:

We looked at a picture of a woman from colonial times cooking. I asked the students if the people in the picture could go to a grocery store to buy pizza or food in a can. One student had an interesting response; she said they couldn't because they were too poor. I explained that it was not because people were poor during George Washington's time, but that many foods were not available. We also talked about there being no electricity, so all of the cooking had to be done by hand and over a fire.

She adjusted the next lesson to include a component that looked at examples of wealthy individuals from the past. During this lesson, she showed the students a picture of Mount Vernon and attempted to explain to the class that George Washington had been wealthy when he was alive, further illustrating the fact that some people in the past would use new technology if it had been available. The students then compared the size of George Washington's home and large amount of land to the size of their own home and yard.

Despite these interventions, many of the students were still unable to appreciate that the past can be further broken down into further distinctions. This confirms Barton and Levstik's (1996) findings that kindergarten-age students neither think in chronological time nor do so in a binary (now and then) manner. During the study, Ms. Tiemann emphasized the differences between the time of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln (in addition to the differences between those periods and today). Most of the students remembered these differences, but could not make the connection that it meant that the two figures lived during different times. Ms. Tiemann discovered this during the final student interviews. After showing the students a historical picture, she asked them who they thought was alive at the same time as the picture. Most of the students listed all of the figures they studied, and many included other historical figures they had heard about, for example:

Q: Who do you think was alive during the time of this picture?

A: George Washington, Betsy Ross, the Pilgrims, and Abraham Lincoln

This does not mean historical differences should not be presented to young students. Many of the students in the class were drawn to the new information they were learning about historical figures. For example, during the unit, a student who was performing at a lower level in language arts and math showed a heightened interest in the new information and retained much more of it than he did in other content areas, as Ms. Tiemann reflected in her anecdotal notes:

I continued talking about Abraham Lincoln. I was surprised with the amount of information that they remembered, considering how squirmy they were on the day I introduced him. I asked what things Abraham Lincoln

could do that George Washington could not do. They said, "ride on a train" and "have pictures taken." The student who said that they could take pictures struggled in other subjects so I was surprised that he remembered that information. I think he pays more attention to new things he finds exciting.

Much of the information Ms. Tiemann gathered from student drawings came from her observations of the students and discussions she had with them after they had completed their drawings. The process of creative drawings was new to most of the students in a school setting. Usually, they simply copied a picture that was on the board, often being told to use the same colors as the model. Little critical thinking skills or creativity were required for these assignments. However, for this project, the students were encouraged to come up with their own drawings based on information they had learned about the historical figure they had studied. During the first set of pictures, most of the students continued to copy the modeled drawing that was on the blackboard. During the second drawing activity, many of the students appeared more comfortable with the process and were more creative with their drawings. The first drawings (of George Washington) seemed to show that the students had a basic understanding of the difference between past and present. When she talked to the students, one related that the smoke coming out of the chimney came from a fireplace (see Appendix, Picture C). Another student explained that George Washington and his wife were going on a horse-drawn cart to their house.

At the end of the unit, the students drew similar pictures of Abraham Lincoln. Again, she learned a large amount of information about the students' historical understanding from having them explain their drawings. She found that some of the students were distinguishing between past and present events, but they were mixing up information from differ-



ent periods in the past, lumping all information they had discussed during the unit into a category of *not now*. One student explained her drawing of Abraham Lincoln in which he was wearing a powdered wig with a bow — information that the class had discussed when studying George Washington's time. When she asked whether or not Lincoln could have met Washington, the student responded "Yes." Another student drew a picture that showed she was beginning to distinguish between different periods in history (see Appendix, Picture D). She explained that her drawing was of a man taking Abraham Lincoln's picture, using an old camera. Abraham Lincoln had to stand very still for his picture for a long time (something they had discussed). When she asked the student if George Washington could have had his picture taken with a camera she said, "No."

## Results

Beyond the anecdotal evidence reported above, Ms. Tiemann conducted more systematic analysis of the students' second drawings; she compared the results of her interviews with the six selected students before and after the unit. Having let the categories emerge from the data, she constructed three basic levels of temporal understanding as demonstrated by her students' drawings, class discussions, and interviews during the unit: students who could not distinguish between past and present, students who could distinguish between past and present, and students who distinguished between different periods in history.

### *Level One*

Students at level one did not make any distinctions between past and present. In their drawings, they included current-day objects or described objects in a way which could only be used in the present, and they were unable to describe why objects were placed in the picture. In the interviews, they could not appre-

ciate that individuals in the past did not have access to the same objects as today. Six of the class members were at this level. One out of the six interviewed students was at the level.

### *Level Two*

Students at level two could make binary distinctions between past and present. In their drawings, they identified objects that had different uses in the past but also included objects that were not appropriate for the depicted period. In the interviews, they divided objects into groups of past and present but had difficulty explaining why. Eleven members of the class were at this level. Four out of the six students interviewed were at this level.

### *Level Three*

Students at level three could consistently make distinctions among the periods. In their drawings, they described objects in a manner that fit the appropriate period. In their interviews, they accurately and consistently divided objects into groups of past and present and described how the historical image was different from today. Three of the class members were at this level. Two out of the six students interviewed were at this level.

Regarding changes in historical distinctions between the pre- and post interviews, five out of six of the interviewed students were initially at level one understanding, but only two remained at this level after the intervention. Only two of the interviewed students were initially at level two understanding, but, after the unit, four achieved this level. None of the interviewed students were initially at level three, but two had reached this level after the unit. Thus, the growth in temporal understanding of the interviewed students roughly paralleled the overall growth of the class. As we can see, the majority of students were grouped into the midrange category; they were able to distinguish between past and present in a binary way but could not further differentiate periods of

history. Interestingly, not all of the high-achieving students were able to reach level three understanding. This suggests that historical thinking is not necessarily linked to knowledge growth in other domains or to more narrowly-conceived forms of intelligence such as IQ or achievement on standardized tests.

The goal of the prescribed social studies curriculum in Virginia was to assist the kindergarten students in learning that the past was different from today. At the end of the Famous Americans Unit, most of the students were able to do this. Using images and discussions of cultural universals was a successful tool in allowing them to do so. While not necessarily demonstrating dramatic growth in student understanding giving the time constraints and pressures exerted by other subjects, the unit was effective and beneficial.

### **Implications**

Using cultural universals to teach students about the past provided the class with more opportunities for questions; it brought to light some misconceptions held by students and created opportunities for many of the students to begin to critically look at new information. During the second drawings, a question that Ms. Tiemann had not previously considered came to light. A few students incorporated elements of fantasy into their pictures. Two students (who sat at the same table and most likely influenced one another) said that the train that Abraham Lincoln was riding on was “Thomas the Tank Engine”(see Appendix, Picture F) — a character from a popular children’s television program. Another student showed Lincoln’s house as being a castle. Another student had a large number of balloons and confetti surrounding Lincoln, saying that there was a party occurring for him, and another student engulfed Lincoln in gigantic flowers (see Appendix, Picture F). This led Ms. Tiemann to wonder if these students could make any distinctions between fantasy and real historical events. To follow up during the final

student interviews, she attempted to find out if the students truly understood the differences between history and fantasy. In general, the students seemed confused by the question. Many gave the answer they thought she wanted to hear — that the two were different — but were unable to explain the differences between the two. This response, Ms. Tiemann reflected, was a possible product of the systematic indulgence of fantasy often found in many kindergarten classrooms. In her particular class, her students had earlier been asked to look for leprechauns and talk about the tooth fairy.

Researchers disagree about using elements of fantasy to assist students in learning new information. Egan (1989) argues that fictional stories are a beneficial method for presenting new information to students because they have an easier time understanding its structure. He suggests that those developmental traits should be indulged, not overcome. For Egan, it does not matter whether false information or elements of myth and fantasy are mixed together with fact because students will learn to separate these two when they are older. In contrast, Brophy and Alleman (2006) insist that it is important for young students to learn how their own world works; therefore, teachers should directly target and clear up their misconceptions.

After working with her kindergarten students, Ms. Tiemann recognized the benefits of presenting information in a story format because her students were drawn to the structure of myths, fantasy, and fictional stories. However, after discussing cultural universals with her students, she also appreciated the benefits of clearing up students’ misconceptions:

When students are only told new information and are not taught to ask questions about it or compare it to information that they have a more in-depth understanding of, it is difficult to know if they have a full understanding of that new information. If historical information is presented to students in the form

of a story, the teacher should be careful to not provide the class with false information. Giving students time for discussion and questioning after a lesson is important ... this is the point when student understanding can be gauged.

### Conclusion

This study suggests that with the right instruction kindergarten-age students may be more capable of learning about the past than previously thought. After only a brief intervention, the majority of the students in Ms. Tiemann's kindergarten classroom demonstrated an improved understanding of the difference between past and present, and many could make three temporal distinctions. Much of this understanding can be attributed to using cultural universals (as a means and not an end), temporally appropriate images, and hands-on activities. Studying history through images and cultural universals made the information more accessible to the students along with bringing to light many of their misconceptions about differences between the present and periods of the past. In conjunction with images of the cultural universals, the class discussions were a highly successful tool in clearing up misconceptions. Ms. Tiemann utilized this strategy in other subjects throughout the school day, typically with the same positive effect.

Much of the current elementary social studies research in recent years has been focused on the upper grades for which students have been found to achieve impressive disciplinary tasks (see Vansledright, 2003). More classroom-based research is needed on the potentials and possibilities of social studies in the primary grades. Specifically, this study suggests that further research needs to be conducted on the relationship between distinguishing between fact and fantasy and past and present. Are the two cognitive distinctions related? Also, further classroom-based research needs to explore how cultural universals can be used as a means towards the acquisition of

content knowledge and not merely as an end in itself. This study suggests that the content of a prescribed standard-based curriculum as recommended by Crabtree and Ravitch does not necessarily need to be viewed as exclusionary and antagonistic to the research-based findings and recommendations of Brophy and Alleman.

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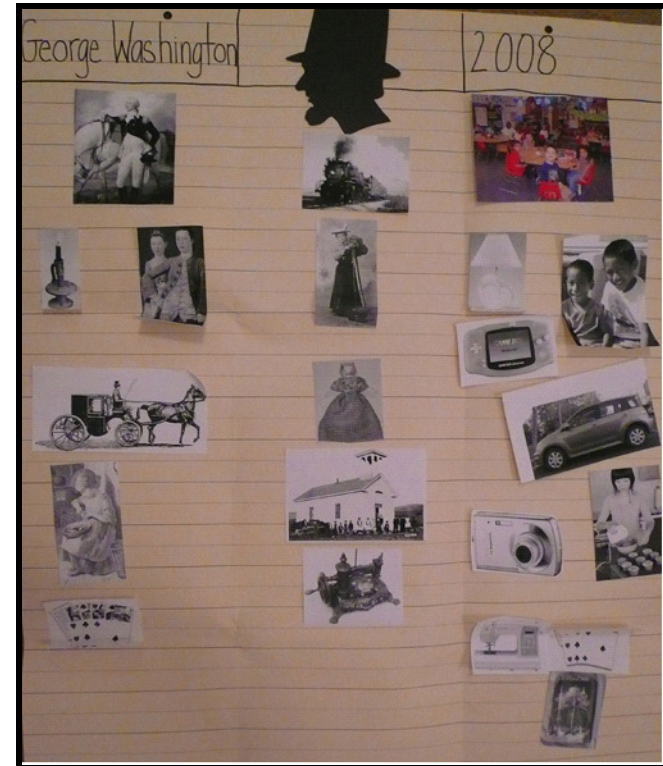
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Appendix A



Picture A: An example of the clothing sorting activity.



Picture B: The students' chart of historical examples.



*Picture C:* A student's historically appropriate picture of George Washington.



*Picture D:* A student's historically appropriate picture of Abe Lincoln.



*Picture E:* An example of a student's mixing fantasy and fact.



*Picture F:* An example of a student's mixing fantasy and fact.

## **Appendix B**

### **Pre-Unit Interview Questions**

- When do you think this picture is from?
- Who do you think was alive during the time of this picture?
- Tell me about the picture.
- Which of these objects do you think were around during the time of the large picture?
- What other objects do you think were around during the time of the large picture?

### **Post-Unit Interview Questions**

- When do you think this picture is from?
- Who do you think was alive during the time of this picture?
- Tell me about the picture.
- Which of these objects do you think were around during the time of the large picture?
- What other objects do you think were around during the time of the large picture?
  
- What do you remember about Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Betsy Ross?
- What is the difference between history (things that happened long ago (GW/AL)) and fantasy (things like fairy tales or Thomas the tank engine)?