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ABSTRACT

A cross-sectional study examined age differences in children's conceptions of early U.S. history. Students in grades 2, 3, 6, and 8 (n=281) were asked to respond to a question about how the United States became a country. Their essays show significant changes with age. Older students were more likely to include errors of historical fact in their essays, possibly because they included more detail. Younger students tended to conceptualize a "country" in terms of one or more concrete entities, but eighth graders were more likely to conceptualize a "country" in abstract terms. Older students were more likely to acknowledge that certain events precipitated the formation of the new country, and they were more likely to evaluate historical events critically. Findings are consistent with the hypothesis that students' understanding of historical events is likely to evolve as increasingly complex cognitive abilities emerge over time. Implications for instruction are discussed. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

Cognitive Development as Reflected in Children's Conceptions of Early American History

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As children move through the grade levels in a typical American curriculum, they become increasingly more knowledgeable about the history of their country. We hypothesized that children also develop increasingly sophisticated ways of *thinking about* history. Effective learning and achievement in history involves much more than the mastery of historical facts; it also requires learners to think about historical events in an abstract fashion, form and test various hypotheses about why some events may have led to others, consider the possible thoughts and motives of people who lived in a different time and place, and have empathy for historical figures (Leinhardt, Stainton, & Virji, 1994; Seixas, 1996; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991; Yeager et al., 1997). Many of the mental activities just listed—thinking abstractly, forming and testing hypotheses, perspective taking, and empathizing—require reasoning abilities that are more likely to be present in the middle school and secondary grades than in the elementary grades (Eisenberg, 1982; Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1993; Selman, 1980). Children in the primary grades have little understanding of historical time—a fairly abstract notion—and tend to describe historical events only as occurring "back then" or "a long time ago" (Barton & Levstik, 1996). And even sixth graders seem to have trouble considering the personal motives that fueled the American Revolution (Sinatra, Beck, & McKeown, 1992).

We conducted a cross-sectional, exploratory study to examine age differences in children's conceptions of early American history. We observed several age trends in children's performance that we relate to more general trends in cognitive development.

Method

We asked second, third, sixth, and eighth graders ($N = 281$) to respond in writing to this question:

> The land we live on has been here for a very long time, but the United States has only been a country for a little more than 200 years. How did the United States become a country?

Students had as much time as they needed to respond to the question; all students completed their essays within a 45-minute time interval.

Three raters independently scored the essays with respect to the following characteristics:

- Definition of what determines the "making" of a country (e.g., forming a government, building towns, the geological emergence of a new continent)
- Attribution of the birth of the country to particular sources (e.g., to specific people, to God, to the flag)
- Nature of events focused on, either general (e.g., a war) or specific (e.g., Boston Tea Party
- Presence of errors (erroneous facts; combining unrelated events; events out of sequence)
- Notion of several colonies combined to form a nation

- Historical figures portrayed as real people, with thoughts, motives, and purposefulness
- Value-laden statements (e.g., patriotism, discussion of unfair treatment of Native Americans)
- Use of the word *we* in reference to the country (e.g., "We fought a war")

An essay was coded as possessing a particular characteristic only if at least two raters identified the characteristic as being present.

Frequencies of the various characteristics were tallied separately for three groups: second and third graders ($n = 65$), sixth graders ($n = 95$), and eighth graders ($n = 121$). The frequencies of each characteristic at different grade levels were compared using a chi-square significance test.

Results and Conclusions

Chi-square analyses (α=.05) revealed several significant changes with age:

- Contrary to expectations, older students were more likely than younger students to include errors of historical fact in their essays ($\chi^2 = 28.032, p < .001$). This result may have been due in large part to the fact that older students' wrote at greater length and included more details in their essays.
- Younger students tended to conceptualize what a *country* is in terms of one or more concrete entities (e.g., the acquisition of new land, or the existence of new buildings and towns). In contrast, older students (especially eighth graders) were more likely to conceptualize a *country* in terms of abstract qualities (e.g., a new government) ($\chi^2 = 24.801, p < .001$).
- Younger students were more likely to attribute the origin of the new country to inappropriate, and usually very concrete, sources (e.g., to George Washington, God, or the Pledge of Allegiance) ($\chi^2 = 45.968, p < .001$).
- Older students were more likely to acknowledge that certain events precipitated the formation of the new country ($\chi^2 = 20.872, p < .001$). When younger students described events that led to the formation of the new country, they were more likely to identify specific events (e.g., the Boston Tea Party or George Washington's cutting down a cherry tree) rather than to more general events (e.g., a war) ($\chi^2 = 6.697, p < .05$).
- Older students were more likely to evaluate historical events critically (e.g., by making value judgments about the colonists' actions, or by discussing the sacrifices that historical figures made for the greater good) ($\chi^2 = 26.292, p < .001$).
- Older students were more likely to use the term *we* in their discussion (e.g., "we started to make laws," or "we joined together to form a country") ($\chi^2 = 71.303, p < .001$).

More generally, then, older students appeared to have a more abstract conception of the origins of the United States as a country. In addition, we interpreted the older students' frequent use of *we* as reflecting a greater identity with the early colonists, and hence as reflecting greater perspective-taking and empathy. Such findings are consistent with our hypotheses regarding how students' understanding of historical events is likely to evolve as increasingly complex cognitive abilities emerge over time.

Educational Implications

Previous researchers have suggested that students' prior knowledge and beliefs about historical events, whether acquired in or outside of the classroom, must be taken into account if history instruction is to be effective (Barton & Levstik, 1996; Beck, McKeown, & Gromoll, 1989; McKeown & Beck, 1994). Our findings indicate that students' cognitive capabilities—for instance, their ability to think abstractly

and to identify with historical figures—are an equally important consideration. Many students' tendency to learn American history as a series of specific and unrelated events, rather than to acquire an integrated understanding of how various events have contributed to the country's continuing evolution, may be due, at least in part, to the fact that some essential cognitive capabilities have not yet emerged. Clearly, history instruction must take students' cognitive levels into account. A question for future research to address is the extent to which history instruction may actually *promote* more advanced ways of thinking about history, or perhaps more advanced cognitive development in general.

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