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ABSTRACT

This paper uses classroom observations of two high school social studies teachers' units about the U.S. civil rights movement and interviews with students in each class to explore the relationship between teachers' practices and students' understandings of history. The paper's analysis suggests that, while there is not sufficient evidence to support a causal relationship, the data do suggest a powerful correlation between each teacher's practices and the views their students construct of history in general and of the U.S. civil rights era in particular. The paper comes out of the "Fallingwater" policy and practice study a multi-year examination of the relationships between national, state, and local education reform efforts and school/classroom practices, this project is in its fifth year. Location of the study reported in the paper is a suburban high school in western New York state. Contains 9 notes and 62 references. (BT)

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An Exploration of the Relationship Between  
Teachers' Practices and  
Students' Understandings of History**

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**It's Just the Facts, Or Is It?**  
**An Exploration of the Relationship Between Teachers' Practices and  
Students' Understandings of History**

Social studies education--a field once dominated by conceptual and theoretical work is now seeing a growth spurt of empirical study. Two general strains have developed: One looks at what children know and how they learn; the other looks at teachers' practices. Only rarely do those interests intersect, however, for few researchers look at the relationship between teachers' practices and students' understandings of subjects like history.

Those researchers interested in student learning tend to emphasize how children make sense of history (Epstein, 1998; McKeown & Beck, 1994; Seixas, 1994, 1996; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992), how they read texts (VanSledright & Kelly, 1995; Wineburg, 1991), where their ideas about history come from (Barton, 1995; Epstein, 1998; Seixas, 1993; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992) and the nature of their historical thinking (Holt, 1990; Leinhardt, 1994; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994). Researchers looking into teachers' practices tend to focus on the differences in instructional approaches (Evans, 1990; Thornton, 1988; VanSledright & Brophy, 1995), the relationship between teachers' subject matter knowledge and their instructional representations (Cornbleth, 1998; Wilson, 1990; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991; Yeager & Davis, 1996), the use of alternative pedagogies (Bickmore, 1993; Gabella, 1994), the use of textbooks (Kon, 1995; Stake & Easley, 1978), influences on teachers' content and instructional decisions (Evans, 1990; Grant, 1996; McCutcheon, 1981; Romanowski, 1996; Sturtevant, 1996), and how teachers make sense of changes in educational policy (Grant, 1996, 1997b).

This research on students and teachers brings a much needed empirical focus to a field long content to theorize. There is much more to do, however, for one quickly realizes that there are very few studies which explore the intersection of teachers' practices and students' understandings (e.g., Evans, 1988; Leinhardt, 1994; VanSledright, 1995, 1996). Reforms documents like the *National Standards for United States History* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1994) offer suggestions about ideas and activities that teachers might employ. Absent from virtually all

reforms, however, is any real sense of how teachers and students *together* negotiate the complex terrain of historical understanding (Grant, 1995, 1997a).

In this paper, I use classroom observations of two high school social studies teachers' units on the civil rights movement in the United States and interviews with students in each class to explore the relationship between teachers' practices and students' understandings of history. My analysis suggests that, while there is not sufficient evidence to support a causal relationship, the data do suggest a powerful correlation between each teacher's practices and the views their students construct of history in general and of the U.S. civil rights era in particular.

### **The Study**

This paper comes out of the "Fallingwater" policy and practice study. A multi-year examination of the relationships between national, state, and local education reform efforts and school/classroom practices, this project is in its fifth year.

The setting for this study is in the classrooms of two social studies teachers who teach in the same suburban high school. The Westwood school district is located in a middle to upper-middle class, predominately white, suburban area in western New York state. Most students at Westwood High go on to post-secondary education, and many attend elite, private colleges and universities.

The two teachers, Linda Strait and George Blair, were born and raised in the general area, but neither grew up in the Westwood district. Strait is an African American woman in her mid-40s. She holds bachelors and masters degrees in American history. Strait has taught for five years (all at Westwood High), following an earlier career as a librarian. George Blair is a European American male in his early 50s. He also holds bachelors and masters degrees in American history, with an additional masters degree in social studies education. Blair has taught at both the middle school and high school over his 25 year career.

Strait was part of the original Fallingwater sample of urban and suburban teachers who were identified by district curriculum coordinators as taking an innovative approach to teaching social studies. After observing a number of her classes and interviewing her several times over the

course of a year, I became interested in also studying her colleague, Blair, who she described as “a total opposite from me.” The notion that two teachers with so many surface similarities (i.e., academic background, type of students, school context, and state-level test) could construct radically different instructional practices intrigued me, and so I approached Blair and secured his permission to study his practice over the next year.

Data collection consisted of observations and interviews. I observed and interviewed each teacher on a number of occasions. For this paper, however, I use observations of each teacher's unit on the U.S. civil rights movement. I observed each class period the material was taught (two for Blair; eight for Strait) and took field notes using a semi-structured field guide. I interviewed each teacher twice. The first interview consisted of questions related to the teachers' knowledge and interpretation of the state social studies framework and if and how their classroom practices have changed over time. The second interview focused on the civil rights unit. Here, I asked how the teachers decided what to teach, what they hoped students would learn, and how, if at all, their teaching of this unit was different from the previous year's. Questions for both interviews came from semi-structured protocols; all interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

After observing the units, I interviewed a total of seven students, four from Blair's class and three from Strait's. (A fourth student from Strait's class decided not to participate.) The students were selected by the two teachers based on my request for students representing a range of academic abilities and interest in the subject matter. All seven students (four female; three male) were European-Americans. (See page 16 for descriptions of the students.) Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and covered a range of topics. Using a semi-structured interview guide, I explored the students' understandings of the civil rights unit just taught, their view of history as school subject, and the sources of their ideas. I also asked how the instruction they received in their U. S. history class compared with that in previous social studies classes and with their current English and mathematics classes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

My analysis reflects the interpretative tradition within qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Erickson, 1992). To analyze the data, I began by reviewing

the classroom field notes and teacher interviews to construct a sense of each teacher's approach toward teaching civil rights. As I coded that data, I focused on categories such as instructional strategies and representations, curriculum materials and assessments, interactions between teacher and students and among students, and references to state testing. As I did so, I used Evans' (1990) categories of storyteller, scientific historian, relativist/reformer, cosmic philosopher, and eclectic to analyze the emerging patterns. Evans' storyteller depiction seemed a good fit for George Blair, although as will become clear, I believe Blair is "master storyteller." Strait's teaching seemed to fit less well with Evans' categories. I entertained Leinhardt's (1994) category of artistic director, but that too seemed a poor fit. I settled on the language of "master arranger" based on Strait's capacity for managing a wide array of instructional venues. (For more on these two teachers' practices, see Grant, in review-a, in review-b).

When I turned to the student interview transcripts, I initially reviewed them with four broad topic headings in mind: 1) students' perceptions of the civil rights movement, 2) their views of history as a subject matter, 3) the nature of the classroom instruction they experienced in their U.S. history class and in their English and mathematics classes, and 4) the influences (e.g., school, family, friends, media) on their views. From that broad review, I developed numerous coding categories under each topic. For example, under the heading "views of history," I included separate codes for historical knowledge as fact and interpretation, historical agency and empathy, connections between past and present and between the past and students' lives, student interest and curiosity, multiple perspectives, and historical judgment.

With a long list of coding categories, I then chunked up the data in order to compare students' ideas generally and by teacher. This approach provided a wealth of interpretative possibilities. To manage this, I considered Seixas' (1996) categorization of historical understanding which focuses on issues of significance, epistemology and evidence, continuity and change, progress and decline, empathy and moral judgment, and historical agency. I also considered the dimensions of historical thinking described by the National Center for History in the Schools (1994) which include chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, historical

research capabilities, and historical issues-analysis and decision-making. Had I decided to write a paper focused exclusively on these students' historical thinking, I might have used either of these two frameworks. The task of trying to describe and capture the relationship between two teachers' instructional practices *and* their students' understandings of history, however, meant some hard analytic choices. In the end, I decided to highlight three elements of historical thinking which surfaced most prominently in the student interview transcripts. One of those elements is *historical knowledge*, by which I mean how students' perceive the outcomes of historical inquiry. The distinction that surfaced revolved around history as a set of undisputed facts versus history as a set of complex and tentative interpretations. The second element is *significance*. Here, I focused on the connections students see (or not) between the past and present, and between the past and their lives today. The third element is *empathy*, which includes the notion of understanding multiple perspectives on peoples' actions and on historical events and the ability to take an empathic stance. Deeper descriptions of each dimension of historical thinking develop in the coming sections.

In the process of analyzing the student interview data, I came to see that Strait's students tended to hold more thoughtful, sophisticated, and nuanced views of history than Blair's students do, and I concluded that, while a causal relationship could not be established, a strong correlation emerges between each teacher's instructional practice and the students' perspectives on history.

### **The Classroom Context: Two Teachers; Two Pedagogical Approaches**

In earlier work on these two teachers, I looked at the influence of their views of subject matter and learners on their instructional practices (Grant, in review-b) and the relationship between their instruction and the state Regents test (Grant, in review-a). Here, I expand that work by exploring the relationship between each teacher's instruction and the sense his or her students make of history as a field of inquiry.

Before sketching the findings, let me describe the units taught and the pedagogy practiced. George Blair and Linda Strait work in the same school, have similar academic backgrounds, express similar attitudes about the importance of teaching about civil rights, and prepare their

students to take the same state Regents examination. Yet, the units they taught could hardly have been more different.

### George Blair: Master Storyteller

When I asked George Blair if I could observe his unit on the civil rights movement, he explained that he does not do "a unit as such." Instead, he addresses civil rights issues and events as they occur in the chronological order his textbook presents. He invited me to sit in on his Eisenhower unit because the beginnings of the civil rights movement would surface in his lecture.

After some welcoming chat with entering students and a brief review of the previous unit test, Blair begins the Eisenhower unit by comparing Dwight Eisenhower and his opponent in the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections, Adlai Stevenson. Eisenhower was "the hero of World War II....He was loved by the GIs and the American public." Stevenson, by contrast, "was considered an egghead...you call them nerds today....Also Stevenson was divorced and in the 1950s that was not as socially acceptable as it is today." Blair adds, "Stevenson was very nice. I liked him." Quickly concluding that the two elections were "essentially the same race....Stevenson doesn't stand a snowball's chance in hell," Blair offers a glimpse into the master or framing narrative of this unit: Dwight Eisenhower's negotiation of dilemmas in foreign and domestic policy:

Eisenhower was conservative....But it will blow up in his face....He made several appointments to the Supreme Court, but one at least is very liberal...and (emphatically) that shocks the hell out of Eisenhower....Remember there was tremendous pressure...very serious things happen and early on in Eisenhower's presidency....He's hit in the face with the Brown decision....Eisenhower disagrees, but he has to enforce it and he does...and there is a serious confrontation in the South....

Eisenhower also confronts the Soviets....(dramatically) We hate the Soviet Union, we fear the Soviet Union....We've got the H-bomb, but we're scared as hell. So the foreign policy John Foster Dulles comes up with...[is] a sad state of affairs....It's called massive retaliation...[and it means] any aggression by the Communists and we would retaliate with everything we have, massively, with everything we have....

With that set-up, Blair launches into a lecture on US foreign policy:

Now the book doesn't tell you this....In the 1956 Hungarian Revolution...the Hungarians ask for our help and we don't give it to them....(incredulously; loudly) Massive retaliation? We aren't going to retaliate at all! It's just sword rattling and it doesn't make any sense. We're not going to blow up the world. Who're we trying to kid?....Massive retaliation; but we can't do that....Massive retaliation...what sense does that make? (quietly) But it shows how afraid we really are....

John Foster Dulles uses the idea of brinkmanship...pushing the Soviets to the brink of war....But how far can you push?....The Soviets do the same thing....Much of the Cold War,



we push and push and push...as far as we possibly can and there's tension, and stress, and anxiety. There's not a lot of fighting, but there's a helluva lot of tension, stress, and anxiety. (A student, David, asks, "Were any shots fired?") Yes...Korea, Vietnam...between the US and the USSR? No...they never attack one another directly....

Here we see several elements of Blair's narrative instructional style. The story he constructs is rooted in standard historical fare: personalities (Richard Nixon, John Foster Dulles), policies (massive retaliation, brinkmanship), and events (Cold War, Hungarian Revolution). He occasionally refers to a point listed on the overhead notes and his stories always contain factual elements represented in those notes. But Blair goes beyond simply reiterating these ideas. Instead, his focus on individuals' actions and his use of various oratorical means (e.g., vocal inflection, emotion, personal reaction, rhetorical questions) builds a dramatic story of tension and fear between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. And like most storytellers, Blair delivers the Cold War as a monologue, punctuated only once by a student question.<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to tell what sense students are making of all this. All seem intent on copying the outline notes displayed on the overhead projector; few ever look up at Blair or seem to respond to his lecture. It is difficult to imagine, however, that they are not caught up in the story he tells.

Day two of the Eisenhower unit begins with Blair talking briefly about U.S. and U.S.S.R. summits. He then shifts to domestic policy. Following the overhead notes, he quickly reviews government policies toward farming such as the Benson Agricultural Act, which encouraged farmers to produce less, and because he has apparently talked about this before, the McCarthy hearings. Blair then announces that the class will go on to "some more interesting things"--civil rights:

Now we move on to some more interesting things....I remember a lot of this...this is the beginning of the serious civil rights....Now you remember Plessy v. Ferguson of 1896. We did that. Plessy v. Ferguson sets up the idea that the South can segregate blacks and whites as long as the facilities are equal....I told you this even though the book doesn't....In economic terms the South couldn't afford two systems....It was too costly....

The issue is going to come up again....Several decisions will be made [around] equal rights for the black population....In 1953, Eisenhower appoints a new chief justice...and it was not a popular choice....Earl Warren was not a great jurist....He was a politician in California, not an academic in constitutional law. When he goes to Washington, he was ignored by some of FDR's appointees [to the Supreme Court]....[He was] ignored,

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, David's question is the only substantive question I have witnessed in the many times I have observed Blair's classroom.

snubbed...(dramatically) and he will change the court to this very day. Warren has a philosophical idea called judicial activism...the process of allowing the Supreme Court to make decisions to help out social issues....This is the first time the court ever did this and (solemnly) it will change the court forever....Warren is a liberal and he will make several major decisions...[for example] the 1954 Topeka, Kansas...Brown v. the Board of Education....

Topeka...had separate black and white schools as all the South did. The Browns wanted to send their daughter to the white school....They can't...so they go to court. The NAACP supported them....The case was presented to the Supreme Court by a lawyer, Thurgood Marshall...[who asks himself] what kind of case can we come up with to stop segregation in schools? Now I've mentioned this before....After much planning, Marshall puts together a defense based on social and psychological evidence. He argued that segregation was hurting black kids....He puts the case together [so that it was] not an issue of constitutionality though Marshall cited the 14th amendment. But the evidence was psychological and social, not legal....And the Supreme Court accepts the argument....The Brown decision overturns Plessy....Brown says that schools, when they segregate, do harm to the black population and segregation must end...(voice rising) and it starts the major movement toward civil rights in the south that continues to today....

After that decision, the South refuses to integrate schools....Little Rock in 1957 is the test....(dramatically) God, I remember this on TV, too, kids....Seven to eight black children try to integrate Central high school....They're prevented....(incredulously) Orval Faubus, the Governor, refuses to allow the black kids into the school....He sends in the National Guard to prevent them....Eisenhower notified Faubus of the Brown decision....And even though Eisenhower doesn't like the Brown decision...he thought the court overstepped their bounds...But he knows he must enforce the decision....So he sends in the paratroopers, active military...there were more soldiers than students....And they escort the students to class for two years....

(Quietly) One of the young ladies recently published a book...and she talks about the threats on her life....The threats to her life were unbelievable....[She talked about how] the black community took the kids away every summer and put them with black families around the country....This woman lived with a doctor in Los Angeles....She told stories of kids kicking her and pushing her down stairs....(Softly) And when I read this, tears came to my eyes....Man's inhumanity to man....

Here, Blair pauses, walks over to the overhead projector, puts up the next set of his hand-written notes, and then walks back to the right-hand corner of the room. He continues in more matter-of-fact tone, but his voice gradually grows louder and his tone more insistent:

I don't think we need to spend a lot of time on Rosa Parks....Civil rights just gets going and going and going....Rosa Parks was just a plain, simple lady....She refused to give her seat up to a white man....When the buses were busy, blacks had to move to the back of the bus....Rosa Parks refuses and when push comes to shove, she's arrested....The ultimate threat to blacks was "Don't you know your place?" (Sadly) I know you don't identify with this and I'm glad you can't....[There were so many] gutsy folks...moving toward civil rights...and I hope some day we'll have true civil rights....

(Loudly) What happens? A Baptist minister by the name of Martin Luther King comes to Alabama....He goes on TV [and] says the city will desegregate mass transit or blacks will use their most important weapon, the boycott. They will boycott until integration....In just less than a year, representatives from the bus system and the government negotiate with blacks and the buses will be desegregated....Blacks will no longer ride in the back of the bus....Blacks were poor so they had to use mass transit....When they didn't use the buses, the companies ran in the red....

(Softly) As I say these things, things go through my mind...Very big things. This was a very painful time for both the black and white population....This was not trite, it was earth shattering....I know I'm going through these things quickly, but they are not trite....

That said, Blair ended the focus on civil rights and he returned briefly to foreign policy (i.e., more talk about John Foster Dulles and massive retaliation, an analogy between the Hungarian Revolution and Tiananmen Square, and the creation of Israel and tensions in the Middle East).

In his presentation of civil rights, Blair uses the same elements of storytelling that surface in his earlier account of the Cold War. His story is faithful to the facts (e.g., the Brown v. Board of Education decision, the confrontation at Little Rock, Rosa Parks' action, Martin Luther King and the bus boycott) and to a focus on individuals' actions and experiences, including his own. Again, the facts serve as the threads with which he weaves a dramatic account of black and white tensions, resolutions, and more tensions. He uses his considerable rhetorical skills to convey both the anxiety of the times and the struggles of individual actors. It is a masterful performance.

In one sense, Blair is doing what many social studies educators advocate, teaching ideas--in this case, civil rights--in the context of the times. This makes sense as no era is reducible to a single focus. Civil rights is an important piece of understanding the 1950s, but so too is understanding the relationship between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. So while some may argue that civil rights gets lost in Blair's master narrative about the Eisenhower era, others may argue with equal conviction that he is serving the goal of a more comprehensive history. By highlighting the Eisenhower presidency, Blair chooses a framework into which he links all the ideas and issues discussed. He might have framed the unit around any of several big issues, civil rights being one of them. Likewise, Blair might have taken any of a number of different instructional stances toward this material (Evans, 1990; Leinhardt, 1994; VanSledright & Brophy, 1995). Blair seems to understand these choices, but he is confident when he asserts that a narrative approach "fits me."

#### Linda Strait: Master Arranger

Linda Strait crafts all of her instruction into topical units. Earlier in the year, for example, I observed her unit on immigration, and in the previous year I saw units on Reconstruction and World War II. Strait's units draw direction from various sources: her college notes, the New

York state eleventh grade social studies syllabus, various curriculum materials, and her own reading. The textbook figures into this mixture as she reviews it for key ideas and assigns sections for students to read, but it drives neither her planning nor her instruction. Her units are a complex whole with various instructional activities and experiences designed to provide multiple opportunities for students to engage the ideas and emotions of the times.

The civil rights unit is designed to last eight class periods. In summary form, the instruction maps out this way:

Day 1: Videotape from the Southern Poverty Law Center entitled, "The Shadow of Hate," which described majority discrimination against several religious (Quakers, Baptists, Jews), racial (Native, African, and Asian Americans), and ethnic groups (Irish Catholics, Mexican Americans). Following the videotape, Strait solicits written reactions from the class.

Day 2: Small group activity where students discuss and list their reactions to the videotape on large pieces of chart paper. Strait later displays each chart on the back wall. At the end of the period, she distributes a feature article on school desegregation from Time magazine (April 18, 1995).

Day 3: Based on the previous night's reading, Strait gives students an practice quiz which asks them to categorize nine statements as either an instance of civil rights or civil liberties.<sup>2</sup> Strait then reviews part one of the notes she prepares and distributes for each unit.<sup>3</sup>

Day 4: Videotape from the Southern Poverty Law Center, "A Time for Justice," which chronicles the civil rights movement for African Americans. At the end of the video, Strait poses four questions for discussion the next day. The questions are: 1) What were the goals of the movement; 2) What were the strategies of movement participants; 3) Why did the movement succeed; and, 4) Given the chance to participate in any of the events of this movement, which events would you participate in and why?

Day 5: Roundtable discussion of the four questions posed the previous day. Strait then introduces an activity that would take up the rest of this class and all the next day's. The assignment calls for students to imagine that they are living in the early 1950s and that a local skating rink owner refuses to admit minority customers. In small groups, students are to create a strategy for winning access to the rink by listing their reasons, methods, and arguments on a worksheet Strait supplied.

Day 6: Simulation where Strait portrays the skating rink operator and responds as students, in their groups, make their cases.

Day 7: Review of part two of the notes<sup>4</sup> and a practice session devoted to writing essays culled from previous eleventh grade Regents tests.

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<sup>2</sup> Statements included, "...a nine year old girl is not allowed to play on the school basketball team" and "...you are arrested for burning the U.S. flag." As Strait explained, the first is an example of civil rights in that applies to conditions of race, gender, or age. The second is an example of civil liberties in that it refers to conditions intended by the Bill of Rights.

<sup>3</sup> This set of notes (another set was distributed and discussed on day 7) consisted of the following elements: a) definitions of "civil rights" and "civil liberties"; and, b) a chronology of the civil rights movement with special attention to Harry Truman's "efforts" and the Brown v. the Board of Education decision. Also attached were some additional readings on the Brown decision, equal opportunity, and the Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education decision in 1971 which allowed the use of forced busing to end patterns of discrimination.

<sup>4</sup> These notes included sections on the early philosophy of the civil rights movement, early leaders and activists, civil rights presidents, later philosophies, more "radical" leaders, assassinations, other civil rights movements (e.g., Women, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Handicapped/Disabled Persons), and Supreme Court cases.

Day 8: Review of the practice essays. Strait then rearranges student desks into a large circle and leads the class in an oral reading of a handout entitled, "Forty Lives for Freedom," a list she prepared of individuals who had lost their lives to the cause of civil rights. Each student reads one person's name and the circumstances of his or her death.<sup>5</sup> Strait then distributes and reviews a handout entitled, "Hate Crimes (Summer, 1991)," a list of 13 crimes committed between June 4-August 31, 1991.<sup>6</sup> Class ends with a slide/tape show Strait developed several years ago on Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>7</sup>

This free-standing unit has several notable features. First, Strait constructs a distinct unit which spans time, circumstance, and groups. She emphasizes African American experiences, but more as a case in point than as the definitive civil rights group. Second, Strait employs a wide variety of activities in an instructional tour-de-force. Multiple learning opportunities arise--reading, writing, viewing, role-playing--each of which illuminates and complexifies the civil rights movement. Third, Strait expands the role of teacher. She plays the traditional roles of knowledge-giver (when she reviews unit notes) and knowledge-evaluator (when she scores the end-of-unit quizzes). Strait plays less traditional roles when she organizes students into small groups as a means of eliciting reactions to a videotape and when she organizes the skating rink activity. Strait is not an "invisible" teacher who directs class from the sidelines (Wineburg & Wilson, 1991), but she pushes beyond the traditional parameters of teacher. Finally, Strait promotes an expansive view of the subject matter. She gives attention to the major actors and events of the civil rights movement. She also gives significant attention to lesser known people (the "Forty Lives for Freedom" list) and events (the "Hate Crimes" list). The two videotapes and the skating rink simulation seem particularly suited for bringing the civil rights movement down to a recognizable

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Rev. George Lee--killed for leading voter registration drive (Belzoni, Mississippi, 1955); Willie Edwards--killed by the Klan (Montgomery, Alabama, 1957); Paul Guihard--European reporter killed during the Ole Miss riot (Oxford, Mississippi, 1962); and Virgil Lamar Ware--youth killed during wave of racist violence (Birmingham, Alabama, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Albuquerque, New Mexico (June 4, 1991)--A cross was burned on the lawn of a racially mixed family; Woodbridge, New Jersey (June 28, 1991)--Thirteen people were arrested for assaulting and harassing Asian Indians; Fullerton, California (July 7, 1991)--A Chinese American teenager was beaten unconscious by Skinheads.

Strait adapted the "Forty Lives" and "Hate Crimes" lists from materials she received from the Southern Poverty Law Center.

<sup>7</sup> Strait had to be absent from school the next day. She prepared a 12 question, multiple-choice quiz to be administered that day. The questions ranged from definitional (e.g., Which action is the best example of civil disobedience?) to generalization (Which is the most valid conclusion to be drawn from the study of the civil rights movement in the U.S. since 1954?) to interpretive (e.g., students were presented with the quotation, "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering.... We will not hate you, but we cannot obey your unjust laws," and asked who was the most likely author--Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr., W.

and empathic level. So while Strait covers much of the standard political and economic history curriculum, her unit delves far into the ordinary lives that represent an emphasis on social history.

Reformers would probably applaud Strait's efforts. And they should, for students were generally actively engaged, and there were instances of truly powerful teaching. Consider the example of the skating rink simulation.

**The skating rink simulation.** During the class period before the simulation, Linda Strait assigned students to five groups. She gave them 10 minutes to brainstorm reasons, methods, and arguments in order to persuade a white skating rink operator during the 1950s to rethink her policy of prohibiting entry to minority customers. While students began the task, Strait circulated, alternately listening to and commenting on their deliberations. Just before the bell, she informed students that they would have six minutes to convince her (as the skating rink operator) to change the policy during the simulation the next day.

Students arrived the following day to see one chair in the middle classroom and the remaining desks arranged around the room in five groups. After taking roll, Strait sat in the single chair and announced it was time to start. A pattern developed where each group, in turn, walked over to Strait (who played the rink operator role with passion and spirit), made their pitches, responded to Strait's questions and barbs, and then sat down. After the last group, Strait commented on the groups' various efforts. What follows are the interactions as two groups presented their arguments and Strait's closing comments:

The first group (Jerry, Sue, Linda, Rachel, and Terry--all white students) approached Strait. They did so sheepishly and hesitantly. Strait immediately launched into her character. "How did you folks get in here?" she demanded.

Sue--"We want to skate."

Strait--"Sorry, whites only."

Jerry--"What's the difference?"

Strait--"That's the policy, that's always been the policy...in this town."

Jerry--"...that isn't fair..."

Linda--"You're going to lose customers."

Strait--....."no problem so far...you (pointing to Jerry; presuming he is white and the others are minorities) can skate, but they have to go."

Jerry--"We have no choice but to protest."

Rachel--"And we'll encourage our friends not to come."

Strait--..."I'm not too concerned...As you can see, it's busy tonight..."

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E. B. Du Bois, or Malcolm X)

Jerry asks if the students can re-group and come back. Strait, still in character, asks him what he's talking about. He tries to explain that he's talking to Strait, the teacher.

Strait--"I own a skating rink. I don't know any teacher. (to Jerry) He can skate, but the rest of you got to get out of here."

Rachel--"If you don't let us skate, we're going to block the door."

Strait--"Well, that's fine. I'll just have you arrested....I suggest you leave or I'm going to call to get you removed from the premises."

As Jerry's group leaves, Ned, a member of the audience, called out, "Man, this is impossible!" Back in their seats, the group huddles and returns for a second try. Terry said, "We have to emphasize that this is a racist facility." Strait shrugged and said, "It's no different from any other in this town."

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The other groups followed. Most echoed the arguments about fairness and the loss of business, and issued threats of ensuing protests. Some tried to broker special times for minority skaters; others appealed to Strait's courage in breaking with tradition. The last group used some of these appeals and added one new one:

The final group (two white boys--Ben and Steve; two white girls--Melissa and Anna; and one Chinese American girl--Kim) approached Strait. She ignored them. Finally, Melissa said, "Excuse me." Strait looked up.

Ben--"We'd like to skate in your rink."

Strait--"You can skate, but the rest of you have to get out of here."

Ben--"What you're doing is unconstitutional."

Strait--"I know my constitution."

Steve--"If you're going to segregate..."

Strait--"Look, I'm not a lawyer, I'm a businesswoman....But there's no law in this town that says I can't just have whites."

Steve--"But if you kick us out, where can we go?"

Strait--"...not my problem. Find another place."

Anna--"It's our right to skate....Think of all the money you're losing."

Strait--"Well, it's about closing time...[this is a] teen curfew violation (Ned calls out: "There was no teen curfew in the rules!")...I need to be getting

home....There's no law that says I have to let you in."

Kim--"Where are we supposed to go?"

Strait--"Go somewhere else."

Melissa--"If the movie theater let us in, would you let us in?"

Strait--"That's an interesting question."

Ben--"...are you thinking about it?"

Strait--..."but...[if I did that, then others would be] ready to lynch me."

Steve--..."the minorities would stand up for you."

Kim--..."think about it, you're a female....How do you know that others wouldn't follow you?"

With that, Strait announced "Time's up." Jerry called out, "That's the closest (to being convincing). In the last few minutes, Strait thanked the students for their efforts and talked through some of the arguments made. "I do believe that two of you convinced me," she said, "...but I continued saying no....Two of you convinced me to think about changing my ways." The class exploded as students called for Strait to reveal which groups had succeeded. After a

pause, Strait extracted a promise that they would not tell succeeding classes and then described her thinking:

The last group....Being a woman hit my feminist side even though there wasn't a strong woman's movement in the 50s....The woman's movement picks up in the 60s....But it appealed to me even though there wasn't a feminist movement. I hadn't expected that. And Mary's group convinced me...(Mary had announced that she had skated before and that, unbeknownst to the operator, was of mixed race background). [Her background] was an interesting twist. It threw me off. The others were just making me mad...I didn't like the personal attacks...but you continued pressing (and that was good).

Jerry said, "We came back." "Yeah," said Strait, "But telling me I was losing business...wouldn't convince me...." Strait then added a final comment on playing her role. "I didn't like the feeling of being a racist," she said, "...I was out of my element...But I realized I was doing pretty good (at rebutting the students' arguments) and that didn't make me feel very good either!" Several students nodded in response.

This vignette illustrates several dimensions of Linda Strait's approach to teaching. First, it demonstrates Strait's impulse to go beyond traditional instructional methods. Students learned about arguments against segregation and methods of fighting it through the videotapes, their textbook readings, and the unit notes. Here, however, not only must they apply what they learned, but they must do so in very different context. Second, Strait wants to provide opportunities for her students to feel the emotions of an era as well as learn facts and concepts. She knows that, while many of her students might sympathize with the experiences of African Americans during this period, few may truly understand those experiences. She wants students to have an intellectual grasp of the era, but she wants them to have an experiential grasp as well. Third, Strait knows that there is power in students working together on challenging problems. There are no right answers in this exercise and Strait understands that students together will struggle even more than they would if they participated in the activity as individuals.

Not all of Strait's activities were successful. Students' interest and involvement ebbed and flowed and sometimes, most often at the end of class, it faded into idleness and social chat. Those times stand out in large part, however, because they contrasted with the more frequent instances where students were actively engaged.



Rather than do a close analysis of each teacher's practice now, I will work that analysis into the next section where I explore the relationships between each teacher's practice and their respective students' understandings of history.

### **Teachers' Practices and Students' Understandings**

As noted earlier, researchers have studied both teachers' practices and students' historical understandings, although rarely in conjunction. During the classroom observations of the respective civil rights units, I was struck by the different instructional choices the two teachers made and by the different instructional approaches they took. As I conducted interviews with students, however, I was struck by the very different ways students from each class talked about history. My impulse, then, was to explore the relationship between each teacher's practice and the historical understandings of their respective students. In the sections that follow, I analyze that relationship by focusing on three elements: historical knowledge, significance, and empathy.

Before proceeding, however, let me introduce the students. The first four are from George Blair's class:

- Alice is a medium-height, thin girl with long, dark hair, who seems quiet and reserved. A Westwood native, she is second generation Italian American. Alice's class average in U.S. History is in the 90s, but she said she has done better in past years.
- Ann began high school in a private school; this in her first year at Westwood High. A tall girl with a serious countenance, Ann belongs to the Westwood chapter of Amnesty International. Although she reports not liking social studies, she holds high 90s average in Blair's class.
- Bill has always attended Westwood schools. A lacrosse player, he is average height, muscular, and soft-spoken. Like Ann, he has a class average in the high 90s.
- Kate plays on the girls' varsity basketball team. Tall and thin, with a nervous giggle, Kate is a Westwood native. Her class average is in the low to mid 90s.

The next three students are from Linda Strait's class:

- James is a Westwood native with a medium-build, a quiet air, and glasses. He says little during class discussions, but he participates frequently in small group situations. Although he has a mid-90s average, James describes himself as a "plugger."
- Melissa, also a Westwood native, is of medium-build. She describes herself as a political liberal. In class, she speaks often and articulately. She reports her class average as being in the 90s.
- Ned, a hockey player, is a tall, athletic-looking boy who moved to Westwood from a first ring suburb when his mother remarried. Like Melissa, Ned makes frequent contributions to class discussions. He reports that his class average has slid into the 80s.

Before I draw the contrasts between Blair's and Strait's students, let me mention one important similarity: All seven students expressed a generally positive view of the United States and of their future lives. Even the student most critical of the U.S. record on civil rights, Melissa, said, "There have been a lot of success stories and...it's (the U.S.) a democracy and there's freedom and people have made it in America." Later, she added, "I still think America is a good country. I'm not going to move away because I don't like what we did in the past." Such sentiments are of little surprise since they correspond with recent research (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998; Seixas, 1994; VanSledright, 1997) which suggests that, while students maybe critical of U.S. history, they see that history largely in terms of progress and they see a bright future for themselves.<sup>8</sup>

These similarities aside, it is the differences among the students that stood out, and especially the differences around the students' views of history as a field of study and as an influence on their lives. These differences suggest that Strait's students' views of history are consistently more thoughtful, nuanced, and complex than Blair's students' views, and in the end, those views seem more powerful and vibrant in Strait's students' lives.

### **Historical Knowledge**

Historians have long debated the relationship between fact and interpretation (e.g., Carr, 1961; Novick, 1988). On the one side, some historians argue for the primacy of objective facts, what Green (1994) calls the "tradition of archivalism." On the other side, historians like Becker (1932), Carr (1961), and White (1987) do not reject factual knowledge, but counter that interpretation, or sense-making, is the ultimate goal of historical study. Not surprisingly, this argument also plays out in teaching and learning history. In that venue, supporters of fact-centered teaching (e.g., Hirsch, 1987) clash with proponents of meaning-centered approaches (e.g., Seixas, 1996; Wilson & Sykes, 1989).

Obviously, historical knowledge does not reduce simply to the fact-interpretation distinction. In the student interviews, however, a clear difference arose around the issue of what counts as

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<sup>8</sup> Those findings tend to represent European American sentiments, however. As Epstein (1998) points out, African

knowing history. Blair's students' viewed historical knowledge as consisting entirely of facts about which there is no dispute. Strait's students, by contrast, tended to see historical knowledge as complex and tentative, and open to reconsideration.

**Blair's students: History as the facts.** Blair's students did express some concern with and questions about elements of history. For example, Ann questioned the U.S. role vis-à-vis "underdeveloped countries or underprivileged" and U.S. "problems with, like Asia and China." Asked specifically about civil rights, however, all said that what they learned in Blair's class echoed things they had learned before. Bill said, "I already, I knew about that (civil rights)...I mean, it was interesting to me, but I already, like, looked into the Civil Rights myself through other projects, like through English and stuff, and movies and other things." Students noted that Blair's coverage of civil rights was "more in depth" than previous teachers' and they appreciated Blair's stories about the era. Yet, none saw much of anything new or provocative in either the content or the stories.

More importantly was the sense that the students see history primarily in terms of immutable facts. Ann said, "You know, when you're in a classroom like social studies or history, you just learn, like, basic facts....In history, it's just, like, plain facts, like, know this and know that, and, you know, I don't...feel anything."

Not only is history reduced to facts in these students' minds, but those facts represent a sense of inevitability, that history is a chronicle of what happened and that it had to happen in fixed way. Alice explained, "In History, it's just, like, given to you, you know? This is your history, just learn it" And Kate sums it up simply: "History's already set for you." Bill appreciates Blair's storytelling approach and he points out that he is able to "remember stuff, like from the beginning of the year." In the end, however, he comes away with the view that history is a chronicle of inevitable and immutable facts, about which there was simply nothing to discuss: "It's like history is already made, you know what I mean? It's facts. So I don't know if there's much you could discuss."

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American students are less convinced that U.S. history is one of real progress.

Strait's students: History as complex. If Blair's students see historical knowledge as a wall of facts, Strait's students are more likely to see it as complex, tentative, and ambiguous. All talk about what they learned in Strait's unit, but they also express the idea that they question what they know. Moreover, it seems no small observation that Strait's students express these ideas in light of the civil rights unit whereas Blair's students talk more globally.

James suggests he knows the facts around the civil rights movement in the U.S. when he notes, "I know there's been discrimination against certain minority groups in the past...certain laws that have been passed, and cases in the Supreme Court." He claims that much of what he knows comes from Strait's instruction: "I knew discrimination, for example, existed, but I didn't know it quite to the extent that I've learned about this year." At the same time, James comes away from the unit uneasy about the juxtaposition of laws and court cases that presumably protect people's rights with his sense that discrimination is a state of mind: "I don't know. I know it's difficult for people to...stop their discrimination based on laws. I mean, I know, traditionally certain groups have been discriminated against, and sometimes you just can't prevent people from having their same...state of mind about these people...." Asked why he thinks this is, James said, "It's just what they've been raised...it's just their values that they've been raised with, and, and after years and years of having similar values like that, it's just very tough to change." James' struggle is a common one: Public sanctions may change some people's actions, but what will change their hearts and minds?

Ned and Melissa also talk about learning new things through Strait's unit. Like James, these students suggest that this new knowledge alternately pushed new ways to think about civil rights and elevated new questions to wrestle with. For Ned, the various activities expose him to ideas that "I never learned till...then." Asked how he makes sense of the unit, Ned offers a brief, but telling statement: "I think that just the past couple of weeks has really turned my mind about stuff." It is hard to tell what this means for Ned is negotiating a range of new ideas of which he had had only passing knowledge. Combined with his fledgling efforts to sort out his own responsibility, however, the notion that Strait's unit had "really turned my mind about stuff"

suggests the possibility that Ned is thinking in new ways. Supporting this notion is Ned's comment that even armed with this knowledge, there is little inevitable about history. "I mean, not that it's totally going to solve it," he said, "but, just give you a different perspective on what it was like. Or it could worsen it. So you never know."

Sensing that there are more perspectives than one is an idea to which Ned credits Strait:

Yeah, I think she says an opinion and what, you know, what she feels and what she thinks, and I think she lets us do the same with what we think, and she takes both views into consideration, and she doesn't say, "Well, this is how it has to be, and this is how it should be." You know, she brings up a question, and she'll ask the class, and kids will say pretty much what they want to say. And she accepts what we say, and we accept what she says, and, we might have totally two different views, but you still have to take into consideration other people's...views of certain things.

From this quote, it is not at all clear that Ned understands that there are competing interpretations of history or what those competing views might be in the context of civil rights. But by honoring students' views alongside hers, Strait makes space for students to see that historical knowledge is tentative and arguable.

Strait's unit also seems to have pushed Melissa to a deeper sense of historical knowledge. Like her peers, Melissa claims to have learned much that is new. She sees a sharp contrast between the surface coverage given to cultures in her tenth grade Global Studies class and the deeper study characteristic of Strait's U.S. history course. "I like (Strait's class) better because I learned more specifics about things," she said, "And that's the way I like. I like specifics. I mean, generalizations are fine, but I like to know what's behind them and what makes them, you know, why can you make them generalizations." Questioning the relationship between generalizations and the evidence that supports them is a sophisticated insight. It suggests that Melissa senses the malleability of historical fact ("specifics") as one constructs interpretations ("generalizations"). As with Ned, we do not know how Melissa makes sense of these ideas, but one senses the possibility of a complex view of historical knowledge.

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In one sense there is something of a paradox here for while Blair provides an interpretive frame, a "story well told," his students seem to miss this and to focus instead on the notion that

history is a string of names, dates, and places. Researchers often fault narrative history for students' inability to appreciate the tentativeness of history because they fail to view history with a critical eye and to understand what goes into constructing a narrative. Moreover, they are more likely to think of history primarily in terms of a straightforward story (Barton, 1997a, 1997b; Levstik, 1989, 1993, 1995; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992). While the first two concerns are probably true, the third seems not to be the case here. Blair's students say that he tells stories, but they fail to see the master narrative he creates.

There is much less sense of a narrative line in Linda Strait's teaching. By not providing a single interpretive frame, Strait may be allowing her students more latitude to not only construct their own interpretations, but also to see the possibility that historical knowledge is complex and tenuous, and that others might construct entirely different views of the same events.

### **Significance**

What is historically significant is no less an issue for historians than it is for high school students (Seixas, 1994, 1997). The growth of social history, in particular, has pushed historians to confront questions about what counts as significant vis-à-vis historical actors and events (Novick, 1988). Students may be naive about the arguments in the history community, but their sense-making impulse enables their entree into discussions about judging historical significance (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998; Seixas, 1994, 1997).

Researchers observe that students use a range of criteria to evaluate historical significance. Seixas (1994) finds that, among other things, the impact on the contemporary world, understanding of personal circumstances, potential for lessons learned, and extreme events or conditions figure prominently in students' constructions of significance. Barton and Levstik (1998) take a broader cut. Their investigation suggests that students' views of significance can be grouped into two primary strains: Those who view the past as a legitimate, unifying, and progressive force and those who view the past through a vernacular lens and see significance in a more ambiguous and critical light.

Elements of both Seixas' and Barton and Levstik's findings figure into the interviews with the Westwood students. Two particular patterns of talk, however--the connection of past and present and the connection between the past and students' lives today--surface throughout the interviews and it is on those patterns that I focus in this section.

**Connecting past and present.** Both groups of students see connections between the past and present. The connections Blair's students offer, however, seem thin and weakly developed. Moreover, none of the connections they describe relate directly to Blair's course in general or to the civil rights unit in particular. Instead, when his students saw relationships between past and present events, they cite sources such as family, media, and other coursework, particularly English. Strait's students see quantitatively more associations between past and present events. Even more striking, however, is the depth of their talk and clear connections they make back to Strait's instruction.

Asked about connections between past and present events, Blair's students often seem taken aback. All are able to make those connections, but the connections seem weak at best. For example, Kate's responses suggest that she has given little thought to any connections between past and present. She said that she sometimes wonders "what it was like in the old days." The images she comes up with, however, are lifeless. "It's like a black and white movie," she said, "It wasn't color, or anything. [laughs] It just looks weird, and different." Asked what this means, she seems unsure. People in the past were "not so much [different] in, like, their ideas, probably, but, how they looked, how they dressed, and all that. I don't think--I mean, we've changed a lot, but...not too much."

Alice suggests a more critical view of the connections between past and present America:

As we learn more about our history, it doesn't look like....The first images, it's like such a free and such a great place to be, and then, now that you really think about it, I mean, there are like terrible things about it, and different things that are bad in our society and stuff.

Asked for an example, Alice replies, "I don't know...greed and killing and...I mean, those would all just go on here." Beyond the fact that Alice offers one of the few critical points of view by a Blair student, what is most relevant is her attribution of this perspective: television. As evidenced

in the description of his unit, Blair does not sugarcoat the U.S. history he teaches. Yet Alice's sense that her views are based in what she sees in television suggest that she sees little in Blair's teaching that helps her connect past and present.

Similarly, Blair's class goes unmentioned when Bill talks about relationships between past and present. Instead, he cites the influence of experiences with family members and in his English classes. For example, his interest in the Depression era was nurtured by long conversations with his grandparents, who suggest that, among other things, he "should be grateful for what I have, and stuff like that." Bill not only sees a ribbon between past and present in family matters, but in his English class as well where he did a literature project on the Depression.

From these sources, Bill constructs a sense of how the past has influenced the present. Asked if people's lives during the Depression seem much different than those today, he replied:

Yeah, completely. To me it does, because...it seemed like it was a different like, completely different swing. Like after the Depression, we still basically have the same...like, we have all the aid coming to poverty stricken people like welfare, and everything like that. And before that, during the Depression there were so many people that were like suffering and they couldn't do anything about it and there was no, like, direct relief. Like today there is. Like if you're really, if you're like in the dumps, you can still look to the government for aid. And back then there was like, many people that couldn't. So it seems like a completely different time. 'Cause like, nowadays, like there's always a like, a plan B for you. And back then, like, it was just all or nothing, in a way.

Some would argue that, while Bill's account is in rough accord with a traditional account of the Depression, his sense that a "plan B" is fully available today is naive. Perhaps. For the purposes of this paper, however, what seems interesting is that Bill's conception of the relationship between the Depression and the 1990s comes not from his U.S. history course, but instead comes from family members and from his course experiences in English.

Ann also draws on her English courses when she makes connections between past and present. Unlike her peers, however, Ann also draws on a different source: her work with Amnesty International.

Linda Strait's students also make connections between past and present events in the context of their English classes. In striking contrast to Blair's students, however, all three of Strait's



students make thoughtful and textured connections in the context of the civil rights unit they have just studied.

James takes note of two comments Strait made in class. In the first, she proposed that people today not being responsible for the misdeeds of their forebearers, unless they perpetuate them. Her second point connected the ill-treatment of African Americans in the 1950s and 60s with that of homosexuals today. Both points impress James:

...just not to make the same mistakes as our forefathers have made. That's the point she brought up in today's class....Basically, you know, think of everyone as equal, and like I said, not make those same mistakes in the past, the discrimination of the past. She also brought up one of the most...targeted groups now for discrimination are the homosexuals. And...the type of discrimination they face is similar to the type that blacks faced back in the mid-nineteen hundreds. She's trying to stress to us not to make that same mistake.

When James said later in the interview, "I like to think that's (discrimination) changing," we see some of the hopefulness for the future students routinely report (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998; Seixas, 1994; VanSledright, 1997). As noted earlier, however, James tempers that hopefulness with the very real possibility that "it's difficult for people to...stop their discrimination based on laws." Echoing the need to change both people's "hearts and minds" (Banks, 1994, p. 89), James points to the very real possibility that laws may not prevent "people from having their same...state of mind about these people."

Ned's hopefulness about the present seems naive when he says, "I don't think anything like that (discrimination against African Americans) would happen again." As he continues to talk, however, he modifies that claim in a way that demonstrates a more thoughtful understanding of how past and present intersect:

I never thought that, I mean, the United States would ever let something like that happen, and just be so...racist. I think that's a lot of problems. I mean, blacks think that of whites, we think that of blacks, I mean, it's just...I think it's happened a lot more...as the years go on.

He then describes the impact that understanding the past has had on his sense of the present:

You know, that certain stuff's happened, but I've never seen it. I mean when you hear something, it's different than if you actually can see it, witness it...I wasn't there, but you saw the footage of it in the film, and...I believe it...I think the kids should know, because I think that might be able to stop racism in the U.S. if they see that. I mean, not that it's totally going to solve it, but just give you a different perspective on what it was like.

Here, Ned tempers his earlier sense that discrimination would never “happen again.” He sees powerful images in the documentaries Strait showed and he is convinced that they are not only accurate reflections of the times, but that they “might be able to stop racism in the U.S. if they (students) see that.” Ned is not so naive as to think that images alone will help his peers to, at once, understand the past and change their behavior. As he said, “it’s not totally going to solve it, but, just give you a different perspective on what it was like.” Being able to hold a different perspective is often cited as a fundamental means of changing behavior (e.g., Banks, 1994) and so Ned nicely ties together knowledge of the past and possibilities for the present.

Melissa, too, holds a hopeful view of the present, although she tempers that view even more quickly and more directly than do her peers, James and Ned:

I'd say that there are opportunities. But it's not exactly as everyone else that sees it, I mean so many other foreign countries say, “Oh, we have to go to America, it's the land of the free,” but it's really not everything it's cracked up to be because there are a lot of limitations....

Asked what those limitations might be, she continues:

I think there's definitely like the racism and prejudice. You know, there's still problems with the African Americans, minorities getting jobs, women getting jobs, getting equal paying jobs, and just some peoples' attitudes towards different people.

In these quotes, Melissa couples past problems of racism and prejudice with current problems. She recognizes that groups who have historically had problems cracking the U.S. economy continue to experience difficulties.

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In Linda Strait’s instruction, we see several instances where she makes explicit connections between the past and present. Some might argue, however, that those connections are weakened by the “trap” of lineality (National Center for History in the Schools, 1994). Lineality is the notion that present events are improperly connected, in straight-line fashion, to the past. Evidence of lineality surfaces in the connection Strait makes (which James picks up on) that the experiences of African Americans in the 1950s and 60s are directly connected to those of homosexuals in the 1990s. Both groups have faced discrimination, but the different contexts of the times and the different social situations of each group undercut any direct correspondence between their

experiences. Such examples aside, however, Strait's students appear to have numerous opportunities to see and reflect on connections between past and present.

By contrast, George Blair offers virtually no instances where he explicitly connects past and present. The one ostensible, but oblique, reference surfaces in his assertion that Chief Justice Earl Warren's actions "change the court forever." Blair narrative of the civil rights movement within the context of Eisenhower's administration has the advantage of avoiding the lineality trap, but it runs up against a second trap, that of inevitability. This trap is the idea that historical events unfolded as they did because they had to, that factors like human agency and chance do not influence the course of history. Historical actors do make decisions in Blair's narrative, but any sense that those decisions and their effects could have been different goes unexplored. Blair's instruction nicely ensconces students in the context of the times. Interviews with them, however, suggest that the past remains just the past.

**Connection to students' lives.** If one lens on significance is the relationship between past and present, another is the connection between the past and one's life. Here again, we see big differences between Strait's students and Blair's. Strait's students are more likely to see a connection between past and their lives today. More specifically, they see themselves as actors in their community and to see the impact past civil rights battles have had on how they and others view the world. Blair's students see virtually no impact of the past on their lives. This is not to say that they have no interest in the past. But one is struck by the sense that they see the study of history as irrelevant to the way they live their lives. Other factors--school activities, coursework, family--influence them; the study of history does not.

One of Blair's students, Ann, talks about her involvement in Amnesty International. Although it is not clear how directly she sees Amnesty's work in relation to her own life, Ann does take part in letter writing and awareness-raising campaigns. "We write to other countries," she said, "saying that they shouldn't, you know, do something to this person. We try to, like, get a better outcome, or try to persuade the person, the leader, to not do that." Ann's interest in Amnesty reflects her sense of America's responsibility to help others. "Well, since we're such a large,

powerful country,” she said, “I think we should get involved...in some matters...that help underdeveloped countries, or underprivileged.”

Ann’s work in Amnesty International marks her as distinct from her peers in this study, for only she is involved in any organized activity promoting a better world. Like most of her peers in Blair’s class, however, her interest and involvement develop outside of his class. Ann makes no mention of any connection between course material and her life now.

Neither do Kate nor Alice. Kate even seems nonplused by the idea that history might be meaningful to her. “History’s already set for you,” she said, “I mean we’re learning about stuff in the past.” By contrast, English classes are sites where she and her classmates are pushed to read, think, and discuss not only the ideas and experiences represented in text, but also how those ideas and experiences relate to their own lives. “In English we’re doing stuff in the present,” she said, “talking about ourselves.” Alice senses a role for history, but that sense is nascent at best and she flatly denies the import of Blair’s instruction: “Listening to [Mr. Blair] doesn’t do anything for me.” Asked if she could imagine discussing ideas in history class as she has in English, she said:

Alice: Actually, yeah! You could do that. But...I don’t know. Not in Mr. Blair’s class, but...yeah, it might be easier to learn that way too if you had discussions on it, on what you thought about different things. Civil Rights, and your opinions, and stuff.

SG: Do you think there are things to discuss? In history?

Alice: ...Some things. Not a lot. Not as...I mean, like, English, there’s more things to discuss, it seems. I don’t know, history....

SG: I’m curious about why you say that.

Alice: I don’t know. The way I, I knew my history, I, like, read the book, study it, memorize it, and, that’s it. You know? I don’t, like, go searching for more information, and stuff.

Bill provides a more complicated story. More so that his classmates, Bill is interested in historical events and he senses that there is something important for him to know. Influenced, for example, by books he has read in English and stories his grandparents tell, he professes an enduring interest in the Great Depression and in topics like organized crime. Yet despite these sources, Bill sees only distance between the past and his own life:

I mean, I just can’t picture like, being back then, like, how they were in the Depression. But when (his grandparents tell him about it), it really has no effect on me because I can’t like,

even picture that, you know what I mean? So, I think that's why I feel so separated from it, you know?

Bill is no apathetic teen, living for MTV and the next party. But he struggles to see any connection between the story of America's past and his life. "Nothing's really happened that affected me," he explains, "I really don't feel as though I'm part of the country." Given that much of the history Bill has been taught is about people like him--white, male, and well-off--it is astounding to hear his claims of feeling disconnected from his past. Much is made of that fact that women and people of color seldom see much of themselves in the textbooks and lessons taught in most U.S. history classrooms. Bill's assertions suggest that they may not be alone.

In contrast to Blair's students, Strait's students see important connections between the historical events and their current lives, they reference the civil rights unit as examples, and they use what they learned in class to talk about their lives in contexts outside of school.

One way James expresses a lived connection with the past is through his reaction to the documentaries shown in class. After recalling several scenes, he said, "It just makes me nauseous, some of what I see." James also cites the skating rink simulation as cause for reflection. In that exercise, he said, "we actually encountered somebody who discriminated against black, minority groups." Although he took only a small speaking part during his group's presentation, James claims that this kind of activity "got us more involved, involved students more in actually learning about it."

Ned and Melissa also connect classroom ideas and experiences with incidents in their daily lives. For Ned, part of the connection he makes is that he simply did not understand the severity and the extent of racial discrimination:

...the fact that, how people, well, mostly the whites, were so against the blacks and how people were treated. Like, they beat them, and just the way they were treated and how they thought their rights were violated....The real issues showed....I never saw that 'till then. I never learned that 'till then. And a lot of kids in class were like that, too. They didn't know that. I got that just from talking to the kids.

Part of what makes all this real for Ned is talking with classmates who were also taken aback by the images shown. Where most students seem intent on forgetting their last lesson as soon as possible, Ned and his friends talk about the activities they experience in class.

This is no small point. Nor is Ned's insight into the different world he and his friends inhabit compared to those students in the nearby urban center. Westwood is a second ring suburb. Ned moved to Westwood from a first ring community four years ago. He understands, however, that a change of a few miles can mean a world of difference:

I grew up in Kastor, and I moved here, so there was a lot of blacks and Hispanics, and I grew up around that, so it didn't bother me at all. And then when I moved here, kids are like sort of iffy about...if you go in the city. They'd be like, "Oh, like that's some...like a different world" or something.

Ned is reluctant to disparage his new peers. At same time, however, Strait's civil rights unit reminds him of the "different world" he now lives in. "I think both places are good," Ned explains, "but, I think, I wish kids that are here would go live where I was. And then I think they'd...see the same thing I would. Maybe they wouldn't, but, it's totally two different things.... If people could only see it."

One other indication of the connection Ned makes between his experiences in Strait's class and his life is the firm, but complicated notion of where his responsibility now lies. Asked what learning about the civil rights movement means for him, Ned explains:

I think that we are responsible that...to make sure something like that doesn't happen again, but...again, it could. Anything's possible, but, I don't think...I don't know what I'd do if that ever happened...or put in that situation, so I wouldn't know.

Here, Ned struggles. He perceives a collective responsibility "to make sure something like that doesn't happen again" that he may not have felt before. Things get messy, however, when he considers his own part. Rather than put on a false bravado, he admits discomfort and uncertainty. What would he do? It is no easy question for any of us to answer; recall that Strait describes her own struggles with the question. Ned may have no answer, but that he even entertains the question is noteworthy.

As with James and Ned, Melissa is moved and even angered by classroom experiences during Strait's civil rights unit:

It kind of disappoints me that this country, in our Constitution is, you know, equal for everyone and they tried to be different from the other countries by not limiting anyone. And they were, you know, hypocritical, went back on their word and did destroy these people's lives just because of their race and color.

Thinking about her own social relationships, Melissa translates the feelings arising from Strait's class directly into her own experiences:

I have a lot of friends who are minorities and I see how they're treated. And how, you know, it's really uncomfortable for me when I go to their, when I like go to their family gatherings and they've got all Koreans there and I'm the only white person there. And I feel uncomfortable. I told my one friend that and she said, "Well how do you think I feel everyday?" And I, you know, it just blew my mind. And then we started something about the civil rights movement and everything and I realized that our country is a little more backward than I thought.

The civil rights movement means more to Melissa than a set of past events. Her experiences in Strait's class give her leverage on understanding not only her own experiences and how she feels about them, but also how others feel and experience the world.

Melissa knew something about social inequities before taking Strait's class. Since the civil rights unit, however, she sees even more clearly that her race and social class provide privilege. She explains, "Me, being where I'm living now and, and the race I am, and you know, just this status that I, that my parents have given to me, it's, I feel comfortable in America. I think that I'm probably a privileged American."

Like Ned, Melissa is not sure where her responsibility lies. In class, she is a strong and vocal proponent of equality and justice. These themes surface in her interview as well, but her assurance is undercut when she talks about trying to negotiate the complex dynamics of race:

We (in Westwood) don't really have to deal with race issues that much. And I don't like to think that I'm racist. I really try, you know, but coming from Westwood I don't know how to deal with people....And it's kind of embarrassing to me, but I don't have like good public relations like that. I don't know how to act....And I kind of feel uncomfortable because I don't know how to deal with everything. I mean, I feel really secluded that I live in Westwood.

Melissa's discomfort dealing with people unlike herself is a remarkable admission, one that few European Americans make (McIntosh, 1992). Also interesting is the way Melissa uses the insights gained in class to help her think about her own position in her community. Her frank admissions about feeling "secluded" in the largely White world of Westwood and feeling "uncomfortable because I don't know how to deal with everything" suggest a sharp insight into the complex interaction between one's self and the greater community. Melissa gives some credit for this insight to her parents, but she seems equally as indebted to Strait. "It kind of helped me this year,

just being able to deal with her,” she explained, “and the way that she (Strait) thinks and the way she presents things.” Strait’s civil rights unit has not given Melissa any easy answers. In fact, one could argue that Melissa is more disconcerted, more uncomfortable for having taken Strait’s class. Yet, as psychologists (e.g., Nisbett & Ross, 1980) remind us, cognitive challenge is key to conceptual change.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the work by Seixas (1994) and others suggests, students may come at the notion of historical significance from several angles. Making connections between past and present events is one, but no less important is the relationship one sense’s between one’s own life and the past. This is no simple matter, however, for two complex issues surface across these student interviews. One is the notion of what students connect to. Blair’s students report that family stories, coursework in English, and school activities help them think about their lives. None cite the narrative history Blair presents as influential. That the females in Blair’s class might feel this way is no particular surprise, for although women do appear in his narrative, the focus on political and international events and on the roles that the largely male actors played, is unlikely to appeal to females in the class (Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; Fournier & Wineburg, 1997). More surprising is Bill’s apparent ennui. Blair’s version of U.S. history is replete with white, male characters and yet Bill senses only distance between their lives and his own.

The distance Bill sees between the past and his life is even more interesting when considered in light of Strait’s students’ perceptions. Although to varying degrees, James, Ned, and Melissa each feel a connection to, in this case, the civil rights era. Another piece of the backdrop of U.S. history for Blair’s students, the civil rights movement becomes for Strait’s students a useful lens on their own lives.

This last point is interesting, in part, because it appears that Strait’s unit provides students with an opportunity to juxtapose their own experiences, their “vernacular” history, with the “official” history of school curriculum and textbooks (Barton & Levstik, 1998). Non-majority students may be more likely to see how their and their families’ histories vary from that generally



taught in classrooms (Epstein, 1998; Seixas, 1994), yet each of Strait's all white students also saw discrepancies, if not between their lives and traditional views of America, then between different images of America.

### Empathy

The third element of historical understanding I want to explore in this paper is empathy. Foster (1999) notes that, contrary to popular sentiment, empathy is neither a synonym for sympathy or imagination<sup>9</sup>, nor is it the ability to see through the eyes of another. He argues that historical empathy encompasses six qualities: understanding and explaining why actors behaved as they did, appreciating the context of historical events, analysis and evaluation of historical evidence, appreciating the consequences of past actions, recognizing that the past differs from the present, and understanding the complexity of human action. Foster's view is helpful, but seems more like a description of historical thinking generally (cf. National Center for History in the Schools, 1994) rather than particular to the conception of empathy.

Lee (1984) takes a narrower view. He defines empathy as a *power* (as in the ability to discern others' thoughts and feelings, as an *achievement* (as in the realization of understanding what others have believed, valued, or felt), as a *process* (as in the means by which we understand the actions of others'), and as a *propensity* (as in a disposition to look for other perspectives on events). This last characteristic, Lee argues, is "an essential part of learning to think historically" (p. 90).

The notion of empathy as a disposition to imagine other perspectives surfaces most clearly in the student interviews for this study as both sets of students demonstrate an understanding of multiple perspectives. The key difference is that Blair's students do not demonstrate this ability in the context of the civil rights portion of their history class whereas Strait's students do.

Ann, one of Blair's students, suggests an understanding of different perspectives when she explains that her friends who represent "other races":

...might see...America differently 'cause...we're on kinda like different levels, maybe? You know...like I'm an American. She maybe came from a different country, but she's still a U.S. citizen, you know? But, you know she still has that, like, bind with her country. And I'm an American, so...we're just on different levels."

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<sup>9</sup> For a contrary perspective on the relationship between empathy and imagination, see Lee (1984).

Although Ann does not believe that the differences she perceives “effect, like, anything,” she implies that she and her friend may see the world differently.

The notion of multiple perspectives also surfaces when Ann talks about her English classes. In a course on African American literature, she found Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, “gave me insight on, like, their side.” Ann developed more insights into African Americans’ experiences when she read Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Are Watching God*. Moreover, in the classroom activities that followed, Ann came to see that her white classmates also held different views:

We had lots (of class discussion). Like, we would read the chapter, and then we would write logs about them, like, how we saw something, or what we felt by it, and then we would get in the group and just talk about it. And like, you would hear other people’s view, and you would say, “Oh, I didn’t see it that way.” We would learn a lot more. It was helpful.

Ann sharply contrasts the kinds of insights she develops in English with what she perceives of as a lack of opportunity for insights in history:

You know, when you’re in a classroom like social studies or history, you just learn, like, basic facts. Like, yeah, they (African Americans) were discriminated against, yeah, they were not allowed here. But then with English, in the books, you learn, like, how they felt. Like, what they wanted to do, like how it hurt them, how it affected their lives and family. So, you could really feel for them. But in history, it’s just, like, plain facts, like, know this and know that.

Kate, Alice, and Bill’s empathic understandings echoes Ann’s, especially the sense that they are more obvious in his English classes than in history. For example, Bill claims to have read a lot about civil rights and other historical topics in his English classes. What strikes him, however, is the fact that the characters he reads about breathe the same air he does. For example, in reference to *The Jungle*, Bill talked at length about the corruption of politics and society. As he continued, however, he focused increasingly on the plight of the novel’s main character, Jurgis Rudkus:

Like, you were actually like able to sympathize with these people....It (*The Jungle*) focused on one guy and how he was, he would just lose his job one day, and he’d be working for a while, and then an accident would happen in the factory that was caused by, like, bad machinery, and he would be affected by it. But there was, like, no justice in it, you know what I mean? So he would lose his job again, and you were able to actually sympathize and see what it was like for these people, and, like, they were objects and not, like, human beings to these people, like the higher levels of employers. They were more objects. They didn’t care about the human beings, they care about money....

Like Ann, Bill senses that different actors hold different views. While one might argue that his contrast of workers and owners is simplistic, Bill clearly distinguishes between the actors' competing perspectives. Also like Ann, Bill attributes that understanding primarily to his English class. George Blair covered the plight of European immigrants in cities like Chicago, but Bill's sense of that coverage seemingly pales against the experience of reading *The Jungle* in English.

Linda Strait's students also report instances where they see multiple perspectives and feel empathic toward characters they encountered in their English classes. In contrast to their peers, however, Strait's students see multiple perspectives throughout the civil rights unit they studied. And even more importantly, Strait's students seem to draw inferences to their own lives.

Although empathy is considered a key element of historical understanding, James suggests this is no easy thing. The skating rink activity, he said, gave him a "good idea" of what life was like for minority citizens in the 1950s. Even so, James makes no assumption that this one exercise gives him license to fully know how people felt at the time. "It's hard to imagine what black people actually encountered," he said, "...and how degrading it must be....I couldn't imagine living [like that]." After a pause, James adds, "I don't know about you, but I'd be suicidal." While this comment might be dismissed as hyperbole, James' quiet and cautious demeanor during the interviews suggests that his conclusion represents a fledgling attempt to put himself in the shoes of another. His effort may be thin, but it may represent a step toward empathic thinking.

This empathic turn seems especially possible when we see how James contextualizes himself in the predominantly white Westwood community:

I suppose...that people that live in the cities would get a better idea than I would, just getting around...observing some of the things that might go on in society first hand....And I guess living in a suburban area, such as this one, I don't get that, that...some people might living in the city of Buffalo, they might see more of what really goes on in society than I would.

Ned uses scenes from the civil rights documentaries to push his empathic thinking. Not only does he sense the possibility of different perspectives on these scenes, but he also tries to imagine white and black perspectives over time:

I think that if black people saw it--'cause I was thinking about this during the movie--if black people saw this, that mostly all the whites were beating on them, that they'd think that we were totally....I mean, if I were black and I saw that I'd be, I'd hold a grudge against the

whites. I mean, I'm not saying I wouldn't like them, but...they did that to us. It'd be different if, you know, the blacks did that to the whites....If I were white then I would...see it differently too.

This quote suggests a student struggling with some very complex ideas. Ned supposes that African Americans might respond differently to the video images than his largely European American classmates. He also hints at a sense of what the white antagonists felt at the time. Ned does not tell us if and/or how he resolves this tension. But by imagining his reactions from different perspectives, he suggests a substantive insight into empathic thinking.

So does Melissa. She credits several pieces of Strait's instruction--the videos, handouts, and skating rink simulation--with sensitizing her to "both sides" in the struggle over civil rights. "She (Strait) didn't blame anyone per se," Melissa said, "she just showed us who did what, and she's pretty fair to everyone." Melissa also credits Strait with helping her see herself in the context of a wider society:

I feel comfortable in America. I think that I'm probably...a privileged American. And if...I was another race or something I probably would see America totally differently. I think it's just how you are placed in life and somewhat what you make of it. But when you're born, you know, most people are born into something and there's some things you can do about it and some of it is just beyond control.

Here, Melissa points both to the notion of multiple perspectives and to the import of those perspectives for how she views her life. Born under different circumstances, Melissa senses the possibility that she might "see America totally differently." What also seems interesting, however, is that Melissa is puzzling through the complex dynamics of birth and initiative. Many observers cast the disparities in American society as a case of either-or: Either one's position is determined by birth or by one's own achievement. Melissa seems to see a middle ground where constraints like race, class, and gender matter, but matter in no exclusive ways. Melissa's perspective is intellectually complex, and by avoiding a simplistic dichotomy, she holds a potentially powerful position from which to empathize with others.

\* \* \* \* \*

George Blair's students see multiple perspectives, but they do not often center themselves within those perspectives nor do they see anything in their history course that promotes alternative

points of view. This is less surprising, however, if we credit Flavel's (1974) distinction between the capacity to see multiple perspectives and the recognition of the need to do so. Blair's students seem not to see multiple perspectives in history (as opposed to in English) because they do not need to. Representing the common conclusion Blair's students project, Ann said, "History is just given to you. This is your history, just learn it."

Ann's perception is ironic, for while one might suppose that Blair's narrative style could lead to empathic responses with featured characters like Dwight Eisenhower, this does not seem to happen; in fact, only Bill ever mentioned Eisenhower. Strait's instruction, by contrast, is much less narrative and her students get nothing close to Blair's narrative focus on Eisenhower or any other historical actor. What they do get, however, is access to a series of different perspectives. They also get opportunities to try out a range of perspectives in public forums. It is not always clear what sense students make of these perspectives, but the comments of the students profiled here suggests that they sense the importance of understanding multiple perspectives and that this is more than an academic exercise.

### Conclusion

Space and the limitations of my data prevent further examination of these students' perceptions of history. I argue, however, that the three elements of historical thinking explored above--historical knowledge, significance, and empathy--support my contention that, while Strait's and Blair's instructional practices may not cause their students' views of history, those practices do figure prominently in explaining the differences across their students' views. I accept the argument that prior knowledge and experience influences students' views more than was once understood (Barton, 1995; Epstein, 1998; Seixas, 1994; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992). Nevertheless, the role of teachers' practices in **shaping, supporting, and/or extending** students' conceptions of history seems important to examine. There is little empirical work in this area and we do not understand this relationship well, but studies suggest that there is a connection (Evans, 1988; Leinhardt, 1994; VanSledright, 1995, 1996).

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If students are to see any value in the study of history, then how to engage their interest becomes a key question. Stories excite some, but as researchers (Barton, 1997a, 1997b; Levstik, 1989, 1993, 1995; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992) point out, stories or narrative history may not be enough. Blair's students are exposed to a seemingly coherent and engaging narrative of the beginnings of the civil rights movement. Yet neither that narrative, nor the ones that Blair presents in other units, seems to inspire students' engagement with or their understanding of history. Instead, the evidence that does exist for their historical understanding comes from sources outside Blair's classroom--personal experiences, media, other coursework.

Some might argue that Blair's students have simply worked their history class learnings into a seamless web with their other learnings. And others might suggest that there is no reason to despair since his students manifest a measure of historical understanding. Both these possibilities should be considered, but two considerations undercut them. One is the thinness of the historical understanding that Blair's students manifest. This is most obvious in their sense that history is simply a set of facts to learned for school purposes, and in their seeming inability to see connections between the past and their lives today. Blair's students notice some connections between the past and present and they seem generally cognizant of multiple perspectives and empathic thinking. In neither instance is their thinking particularly insightful, however. Moreover, when asked to attribute their ideas, they invariably cite influences sources other than Blair's history course.

But if they are developing a sense of history, do we need to worry about its source? I think so, for while experiences with the media, fiction, and family and friends are important, it is the thoughtful study of the past which provides a context in which to develop historical thinking skills and understanding (National Center for History in the Schools, 1994; Seixas, 1996). There is also the problem of the enduring perceptions of history. Put simply, if Blair's students' shallow sense of history continues unchallenged, their suspicion that history holds little value is likely to endure.

Linda Strait's students seem on firmer ground here. It is not clear that they hold any stronger sense of an overarching framework of understanding than Blair's students do. Neither is it clear

that they are any better at historical skills such as evaluating evidence. What does seem clear, however, is that they consistently project a more thoughtful and substantive view of history than their peers in Blair's class do.

But let's be clear here: The fact that Strait spends considerably more time on civil rights than Blair does obviously figures into this differential. On reflection, however, this observation is not as simple as it seems.

First, we must recognize that Strait and Blair are making conscious choices about what content they emphasize and how they structure their teaching practices. Blair chooses to teach civil rights in the context of a larger narrative about the Eisenhower years and he chooses to give the information to students in a purely lecture style. Strait's choices are dramatically different and part of what makes the differences in their choices so interesting is that those choices emerge within the same social context of students, school norms, state curricula, and Regents testing. These factors, which many claim strongly influence teachers' practices, seem to hold little sway here. The influences on their decisions are complex (Grant, 1996, in review-a, in review-b), but the fact that each teacher has the autonomy to make real decisions about content and pedagogy must not be missed.

And that leads to a second point: The kinds of decisions Blair and Strait make are qualitatively different. Strait's unit is decidedly broader, less story-like, and more experiential than Blair's. Her students read, write, listen, view, and interact in a range of instructional settings. This instructional diversity has its drawbacks in that observers may question whether one activity follows directly from the preceding one. At the same time, however, it is hard to ignore the sense that these activities are more intellectually open-ended than Blair's narratives. Strait's students may not always perceive this, but the comments of the students profiled here support the idea that history is by its nature complex, tenuous, and interpretable. Strait's students do not always know what to make of this ambiguity. What they do do, however, is use history as a way to make sense of their lives. Given the thin uses most students assign to history (Seixas, 1994; VanSledright, 1997), this is no small achievement.

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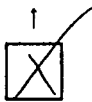
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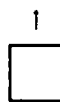
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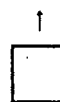
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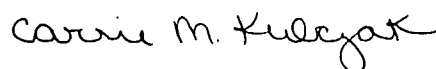
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