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ABSTRACT

This study, part of a graduate level social studies methods course at a large midwestern university, investigated beginning teachers' ideas about teaching and learning social studies before and after their participation in a set of open-ended interviews with children in the elementary grades. The interviews were designed to give new teachers direct experience investigating children's explanations of key social studies concepts and to track changes in the teachers' ideas through a set of focus group discussions. Initial discussions indicated that teachers were aware social studies occupied a position of low status (and low incidence) in the elementary curriculum, and that students often had difficulty learning the content of the subject. Teachers attempted to explain this by suggesting that students were developmentally incapable of learning social studies, students had insufficient prior knowledge, or the subject was irrelevant. They had few suggestions for how to overcome these limitations. Focus group discussions after completing interviews with students suggested a shift away from emphasis on shortcomings in student or curriculum, and toward a recognition of the teachers' role in developing students' understanding, particularly through assessing and building on students' background knowledge, focusing on conceptual understanding rather than recall of factual information, and establishing the relevance of the subject. Findings suggest that experiences that directly challenge beginning teachers' assumptions about children's thinking may be an effective way of developing their understanding of teaching and learning in social studies. Contains 26 references. Appendices contain protocols for student interviews and focus group interviews. (Author/BT)

"I need to shut up and let them talk more":

Beginning teachers reflect on children's understanding of social studies

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Abstract

This study investigated beginning teachers' ideas about teaching and learning social studies before and after their participation in a set of open-interviews with children in the elementary grades. The interviews were designed to give new teachers direct experience investigating children's explanations of key social studies concepts and to track changes in the teachers' ideas through a set of focus group discussions. Initial discussions indicated that teachers were aware social studies occupied a position of low status (and low incidence) in the elementary curriculum, and that students often had difficulty learning the content of the subject. Teachers attempted to explain this by suggesting that students were developmentally incapable of learning social studies, that they had insufficient prior knowledge, or that the subject was irrelevant; they had few suggestions for how to overcome these limitations. Focus group discussions after completing interviews with students suggested a shift away from the emphasis on shortcomings in students or curriculum, and toward a recognition of the teachers' role in developing students' understanding, particularly through assessing and building on students' background knowledge, focusing on conceptual understanding rather than recall of factual information, and establishing the relevance of the subject. This study suggests that experiences that directly challenge beginning teachers' assumptions about children's thinking may be an effective way of developing their understanding of teaching and learning in social studies.

"I need to shut up and let them talk more":

Beginning teachers reflect on children's understanding of social studies

This study investigated beginning teachers' ideas about teaching and learning social studies before and after their participation in a set of open-ended interviews with children in the elementary grades. This is an important area for investigation, because teachers' beliefs about their students' thinking may have a significant impact on their ideas about the kinds of curriculum and instruction appropriate in their classrooms. This project, then, aimed to give new teachers direct experience investigating children's explanations of key social studies concepts and to track changes in the teachers' ideas through a set of focus group discussions. Although the design of the study prevents broad generalizations, it nonetheless illustrates some of the issue that may influence beginning teachers' understanding of the role of social studies in the curriculum, their explanations of how children make sense of the topic, and the instructional implications that arise from their beliefs about students' thinking. And by examining how teachers' ideas about these topics change as they engage in a carefully structured inquiry project, it sheds some light on how university-based coursework or other professional development opportunities might assist teachers in developing more complete and nuanced perceptions of children's thinking in social studies.

Background

In recent years, researchers have applied constructivist perspectives not only to investigations of children's learning but also to the study of teachers' professional development (Borko and Putnam, 1995). From this standpoint, changes in teachers' instructional practices depend in part on their engagement with "concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development" (Darling–Hammond and McLaughlin, p. 203). When teachers have the chance to carefully examine children's performance in meaningful classroom contexts, they often develop new understandings of how children learn (Falk and Ort,

1998). These reconceptualizations are not simply the result of having acquired new pedagogical techniques (through inservices or coursework, for example) but derive instead from the conflicts teachers experience between their prior ideas about learning and their observations of children's reasoning as they engage in novel instructional activities (Nelson and Hammerman, 1996). Such observations play a crucial role in expanding teachers' understanding of "what is possible" (Lieberman, 1996, p. 190).

This process of reflection typically involves three interrelated aspects of teachers' pedagogical understanding—their ideas about how students think in specific subject areas, their beliefs about instructional techniques in those subjects, and their conceptualization of the subject matter itself. A substantial body of research on each of these aspects of teacher thinking now exists in mathematics (Nelson and Hammerman, 1996), and scholarship in the language arts has long been concerned with developing teachers' awareness of the development of student literacy and the resulting implications for instructional practice (for example, Genishi and Dyson, 1984; Goodman, 1973; Heath, 1983; Pappas, Kiefer, and Levstik, 1990). In the field of social studies education, however, such research has been minimal. Despite the growth of research on children's historical thinking over the last decade, and a prior body of research on their knowledge of economics and government, studies of teachers' understanding of social studies largely have been limited to research into preservice teachers' thinking about the nature of the discipline (Bohan and Davis, 1998; Seixas, 1998; Yeager and Davis, 1995) or of practicing teachers' instructional techniques or ideas about the purpose of learning history (Brophy and VanSledright, 1997; Evans, 1990; Wilson and Wineburg, 1988).

The missing element in social studies research is precisely the ingredient that drives much work in literacy and mathematics—research into educators' ideas about how children think and learn. Educators' knowledge and beliefs about learning exert a powerful influence on their planning and implementation of instruction; their prior conceptions act as a lens through which they view efforts at reform (Borko and Putnam, 1995) and these conceptions shape their responses as they consider how—or whether— to modify their practices (Fennema et al., 1996). Although general descriptions of teachers' views of the learning process (i.e., Prawat, 1992) provide a useful starting point, improving

discipline-specific instruction ultimately depends on evidence of educators' discipline-specific views of students' learning. In-depth studies of how educators construct their views of students' learning in social studies—and that analyze how those perspectives change as a result of instructional experiences and the resulting reflection—are necessary in order to provide a knowledge base to guide efforts at expanding teaching and learning in this area.

To date, studies of this issue have been limited to investigations of secondary teachers' understanding of children's historical thinking. Wilson and Wineburg (1993), for example, found that teachers' ideas about historical learning influenced their conceptualization of instruction, but their research primarily focused on explaining two teachers' responses to a performance assessment task, not on directly examining those teachers' knowledge or beliefs about children's thinking. Seixas (1994) reports a project more similar to that explained here: He describes a course assignment designed to give preservice social studies teachers a better understanding of how secondary students located themselves with reference to history; in this assignment, teachers conducted interviews with small groups of students to assess their prior historical understanding. Seixas suggests that this experience led participants to a better understanding of students' epistemological assumptions about history, their ideas about progress and decline, and their perceptions of what is interesting or significant in history.

This research represents a small-scale attempt to contribute further to an understanding of teachers' beliefs about students' learning in social studies—particularly at the elementary level—and of how those beliefs may change as a result of direct experience with children's explanations. In this study, teaching interns conducted brief, standardized interviews with elementary students in order to gather evidence related to their understanding of history, geography, economics, and politics. Those who volunteered to participate in the research portion of the study also participated in focus group interviews designed to assess their initial ideas about teaching and learning social studies and to examine how those ideas had changed after completing the project. The purpose of this project, then, was to give new teachers the chance to explore children's understanding in a structured way and, from a research perspective, to assess to what extent that experience may have had an impact on their ideas about teaching and learning.

Methods

This research took place as part of a graduate level social studies methods course for beginning teachers at a large Midwestern university. Students enrolled in the course were in the final year of a five-year elementary teacher education program (or, for some students, the second year of a post-baccalaureate program), in which they worked as interns for a full year in a set of professional development schools and took education courses at the university in the evenings. Some students were compensated "teachers of record," with complete responsibility for their classrooms for half of each day, while others were assigned directly to mentor teachers who gradually transferred responsibility through a process similar to a traditional student-teaching model, although with a more extensive level of involvement in the school and much longer period of placement. The research reported here took place during the final ten weeks of interns' placements in the schools, so that by the beginning of the project, participants already had several months of teaching experience and had assumed complete responsibility for classroom planning and instruction during half of each school day. For some, teaching social studies was currently part of their half-day responsibilities, while others had completed their social studies teaching earlier in the year.

As part of the social studies methods course (the second in a two-course sequence in social studies), interns were required to conduct interviews with three to four pairs of students in their field placements. These interviews followed an open-ended, protocolled format, and were designed to acquaint interns with key aspects of children's thinking in history, economics, geography, and government. During the interviews, interns were to show students a series of six pictures from different times in history (a standard set was provided to interns and used in all interviews), ask them to arrange the pictures in chronological order, to explain how they knew what order they went in, and to estimate when each picture was. This was followed by a series of questions not directly related to the pictures and covering other aspects of social studies—these included asking students if they knew who the president was, what the president does, and how someone becomes president; asking them what city, state, and country they lived in, and if they could name other cities, states, and countries; and asking them what happens to money in banks and how prices are decided on in

stores. (The complete interview protocol is included in Appendix A.) The structure and content of the interview was based on previous research on children's understanding of history (Barton and Levstik, 1996; Brophy and VanSledright, 1997), economics (Berti and Bombi, 1988; Furth, 1980; Jahoda, 1984), and politics (Easton and Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1969; Hess and Torney, 1967; Moore, Lave, and Wagner, 1985), as well as the professor's less formal observations of the way in which children's ideas about social studies may challenge beginning teachers' beliefs.

The interview was designed specifically to highlight aspects of children's thinking with which teachers might have inadequate familiarity or experience in routine classroom settings. For example, research has consistently shown that children from a very young age are quite adept at sequencing historical pictures in chronological order (if those pictures include clues related to material culture and social relations); based on our experience working in teacher education programs, however, we have found that many teachers adamantly deny that children are capable of completing such a task, and they thus never give them the chance to work with such historical materials. On the other hand, children do sometimes receive superficial instruction in certain aspects of geography (particularly map skills) or economics (particularly mathematical procedures involving money), yet teachers may not inquire deeply enough into their students' thinking to recognize that the conceptual underpinnings of these topics (such as the differences between cities, states, and countries, or the way in which money flows through a commercial transaction) is poorly developed, if at all. The interview used in this assignment, then, was meant to give interns the chance to investigate conceptual areas they might not have encountered during instruction.

At the beginning of the course, interns received training in how to conduct the interview and observed a sample interview between the professor and two of their classmates. They were then asked to select six to eight students from their field placements to interview during the first three weeks of the course; it was stressed that they might choose students from a range of achievement levels, but that they should not choose those who would be too shy to talk in such a setting. Interns were then to work individually or in pairs to interview the children following the required protocol and to develop three to four conclusions about children's thinking based on evidence from their interviews. As a formal course assignment, students were required to explain their conclusions and

evidence, along with their implications, in written essays. An online bulletin board was set up so that students could engage in discussions of findings and implications as they worked on the assignment, but almost no students chose to make use of that opportunity. Most interns worked in urban schools with predominantly poor and minority (particularly African American) populations, although a few worked in more affluent suburban schools with largely homogeneous (European American) populations.

In the preceding term at the university, volunteers for the research component of this project had been solicited during other methods courses. Those participating in the research completed the assignment in the same way as their classmates, but in addition they participated in two focus groups (with four to five students in each group) the week before learning of the assignment and again at the end of the term. These interviews were conducted by a doctoral student specializing in social studies education who had no other involvement in the course; students were informed that the course professor would have no access to the results of the interviews until after the end of the course, and that even then their individual responses would remain anonymous. Ten of the volunteers ultimately were willing and able to engage in the focus group component of the project (although one of the ten was unable to attend the final focus group).

After interviews were transcribed, they were analyzed through a process of analytic induction. The two researchers identified an initial set of coding categories based on emerging patterns in the data, and then subjected the data to a more systematic content analysis in which units of data were sorted according to these initial categories. This coding procedure included both constant comparison (involving the grouping of data from different questions) and cross-case analysis (involving the grouping of data from different participants responding to the same question). The coded data was then analyzed for evidence of patterns in participants' responses, including a systematic search for negative or discrepant evidence, and these patterns were then combined into broader analytic domains. The following section describes what we consider the most important findings from this process.

Findings

Participants' Initial Ideas

At the beginning of this project, participants' perspectives on teaching social studies, on children's ideas about the subject, and on the place of social studies in the curriculum could best be described as confused. We use this term not in an entirely negative sense, but rather as a way of recognizing these beginning teachers' ongoing struggles to understand the multifaceted and often contradictory relationships among curriculum mandates, their own ideas about teaching, and children's varied responses to instruction. Like all learners, the interns in this study were attempting to make sense of their experiences, and at this stage in their career—after six months of daily and intense involvement in classrooms—they were trying to come to terms with a range of perplexing experiences. They had not yet acquired a set of conceptual tools, however, that would allow them to develop consistent perspectives on the teaching and learning of social studies, and their responses to questions during the first set of focus-group interviews revealed their attempts to explore explanations that would help them understand critical issues in the field.

Social Studies in the Elementary Curriculum

It was clear to many of the participants that the status of social studies was much lower than other subjects. As one stated, "So much of social studies is isolated, and teachers don't teach it very often because math or science or reading or whatever kind of comes into play and social studies gets pushed out the door. I know in our [elementary] class, social studies is kind of the end of the totem pole as far as what we need to do." Another said, "I see lots of [district] teachers just skipping social studies, just skipping it, saying, 'Well, we don't need to do social studies today.' I really see a lot of that." And another explained what she perceived as students' lack of historical knowledge by noting, "I think their lack of history comes from the fact that [social studies] is not emphasized in the promotion standards and in the district, so there is very little that you can do." She added that her class does not "even have a have a history book."

Such comments suggest some approbation at the lack of attention given to social studies, and in other cases, interns voiced their criticisms more directly. One complained

> When I was talking to my mentor teacher about the new schedule that I'll have starting next week, I thought I would divide the morning equally between a reading group and social studies or science. Her idea is reading from 9:15 until 11:00 and then social studies from 11:00 to 12:00 when they go to lunch. I was thinking, "Why?" It should be more equally divided, in my mind.

Another described how she had taught an extensive unit on ancient civilizations in an attempt to learn how to integrate content across disciplines, but she noted that students had missed out on some of the time officially allotted to reading, math, and science—"which my mentor teacher was upset about." These initial interviews, then, revealed students' developing awareness that social studies is rarely afforded central importance in the elementary curriculum.

Children's Understanding of Social Studies

Participants also recognized that children often had difficulty learning social studies; they knew students did not always retain what they had covered in class and that they might not even understand instruction as it was occurring. A primary intern, for example, was surprised that just two weeks after learning that Cincinnati was a city, one of her students confidently asserted it was a state. Another noted, "I have been doing colonies the past couple of weeks and I don't think that they get it...Like they're thinking that they're already states...because it's called the Georgia colony...and so they're thinking it's already a state and that's what it looked like when it started." Moreover, participants recognized that creative and motivating instruction did not automatically solve these problems. As one related, "One thing I did that was interesting with my class is where you set up latitude in the class and you act it out, and I thought, 'Oh, the kids got it,' you know, 'they definitely got it.' And then you give it to them on paper and pencil just to transfer it—they didn't get it at all!" Participants had enough insight into their students' achievement to recognize that they were not learning everything that was expected of them, and in our discussions they constantly sought to make sense of these shortcomings.

Developmental limitations. Three explanations for students' difficulties were particularly prominent during the initial discussions, although participants employed none of these with consistent conviction or coherence. The most popular interpretation revolved around the suggestion that children at certain ages were developmentally incapable of making sense of the content they were studying, particularly when it was "abstract." Several interns, for example, noted the difficulty of understanding geographic concepts. One explained, "Like the time zones, anything mapping, latitude and longitude; even though that seems really concrete, it's not. It's a difficult area for them." Another noted that her students had trouble understanding "that the continents are so far away. They think that you can swim across the ocean. The whole space thing is a problem." And several pointed to the difficulty of understanding historical time, suggesting that "they have no concept of time," "they don't know how old they are," "they don't understand the difference between a million [years ago] and a hundred," and ultimately, "History is not a good thing for my kids."

Participants repeatedly referred to students' *ability* or *inability* to understand various concepts, or to what they thought students *could* or *could not* do at given ages. One noted, for example, that "some of the governmental concepts are really abstract, like the purposes of city government, and state government...There are some of them that just weren't able to [grasp] it yet and couldn't explain things to you. It might be a developmental kind of [thing], I don't know." Another suggested that students couldn't be expected to understand the concept of "ten years" until they had lived through ten years themselves: "For a seven-year-old, a year to them is so long because they really cognitively don't start remembering things until maybe they're [older]. I think it's all based on age, what they can remember and relate to." This belief in developmental limitations was particularly clear when participants were asked what aspects of teaching social studies they needed to understand better: One of their chief desires was to find out how age and developmental level affected the concepts their students could learn. One participant, for example, lamented that a second-grade teacher might struggle with a concept for "months and months and months" without realizing that students wouldn't be ready for it until third grade; another longed for someone who would say, "Oh, well, they're not going to understand that so don't even bother. They'll get it next year when they can actually understand."

Background knowledge. A second explanation for children's lack of understanding focused on their inadequate background knowledge. Participants often explained that their students simply didn't know enough to understand what they were being taught. This explanation seemed particularly germane to the problems students had understanding geographic concepts. One intern suggested that the reason students "can't place themselves in the world is that they don't have a lot of experience. They've barely been out of their neighborhood, let along to another state or another country." Another explained:

> I found a real cultural barrier when I'm teaching map skills because last year [in a more affluent school], half of the kids had been to Florida and knew exactly what the beach or coasts or ocean looked like and smelled like and felt like and everything and could point to them on a map. And going to a community where most of the kids had not left like a ten mile radius, I would find myself saying, "Oh, you know, it's on the coast," and their concept of what a coast is so different...Another thing like distance is a really major problem because they hadn't been more than ten miles, most of them hadn't been more than ten miles away from their home. So the concept of a hundred miles or three hundred, or a thousand miles was [difficult to understand].

Still others thought that understanding history would be difficult because students didn't even know who Bill Clinton was, or because "in the inner city, very few of my students even have a family history. You know, they have been shuffled around. Their mother had died. They didn't know their father. They were with an aunt for a while, or a grandparent for a while. As far as a stable, pleasant family history, just going back generations talking...They don't even have that much history in their lives." The idea that students' lack of experiences represented a major hurdle—even an insurmountable one—was a recurring theme in discussions with these interns.

Lack of relevance. Finally, some participants explained their students' lack of achievement in terms of the irrelevance of the curriculum. "A lot of the things from history have changed so much that it's not all that relevant," said one. Another added, "And how can they apply it to their everyday life?!" As one observed, "It's not like they're going to walk out of school and say, 'Oh, let me read a

map to see how to get home.' It's not something that in many cases we present as an area that is important to them every single day." Yet another echoed this view: "They can't apply it, they can't use it like math and science," and still another noted, "I think if you're really focusing on survival and day-to-day math, you can see...how it's important for you to know because you're going to use it. And you need to learn how to read if you want to go to college and make a lot of money. It's good to know science. But history sort of means to you like a luxury or something that's not really directly touching the lives." One participant noted her own role in this problem: In explaining her students' lack of excitement when studying government, she observed, "Well, for one thing, when I teach it, I'm not really interested in any of that because it seems so remote and doesn't make sense to me and so that is probably a problem, but also I think that they [students] see it that way, too."

In some cases, interns noted how students' ethnicity influenced their sense of social studies' relevance. One explained, "A hundred percent of my class is African American, and I mean just the way that history is normally taught, and what the books tell you is...I mean, I would probably be pretty angry if I were them...I don't think that African Americans are portrayed very highly in textbooks." On the other hand, when African Americans were included in the curriculum, students' interest was heightened. One intern explained, "The majority of my class is African American, and so when we did in February Black History month, we did a lot with famous African Americans who they knew, and because they knew it they were so much more initially eager to learn more about them because they were like, "Oh yeah I know who Rosa Parks is." I mean I had no idea that they had heard the name, and so they were interested in it." But for one intern who primarily taught students of European American ancestry, the opposite problem occurred. After using literature that dealt with problems of racism, she asked students to respond in their response logs; typical comments included "This book was so boring," "It was dumb," "I didn't learn anything." The intern described her shock at students' lack of interest in racial problems: "They could not make the connection and that's what I'm having trouble with—is them making the connection to how it's relevant in their life." The lack of relevance of the curriculum—particularly as it related to ethnicity—constituted yet another issue participants were struggling to understand.

Implications for Teaching

Participants struggled to understand the implications of students' understanding for their own teaching. Some considered the most appropriate strategy to be more direct teaching: One, for example, explained that because government was hard for students to grasp, it "took a lot of re-teaching and teaching and teaching for them to really understand...It took a long time." Another noted that because students lacked experience with geographic concepts, "You had to literally go back and teach them the coasts or the beach is where the land stops and ocean starts." Another noted the success of writing geography questions on the board and having students find the answers in the back of their textbooks; this was successful particularly because it was "something that kind of settles them into the afternoon." Others suggested more extended discussion, but again in a teacher-directed way; for example, in one classroom "we did a lot of discussion and reading [about government] and the principal came in and chit-chatted with them about his thoughts on government and how it compared to the school...so they were able to get involved in that way."

Others thought instructional activities had been successful when they had been fun or actively involved students. One noted, "I found that it's helpful, or at least the kids get into it, when it's a game." One explained that a review game "was almost like *Trivial Pursuit*, and I think when they see it in that kind of light they can relate to it more because they have a hard time realizing why they have to learn it in the first place." And still another suggested that a geography activity was successful because "they made their own land forms and then they had a model that they could actually show other people...We made cookie dough, like it was on a cookie sheet, and they made a plateau and a mountain range with the cookie dough and everything and they decorated it."

Participants occasionally suggested that they needed to develop students' conceptual understanding by relating instruction to their own experiences. One noted, for example, that she tried to make history more understandable by basing it "on maybe on when your grandmother was growing up or something that they might be able to...relate to." Another suggested that timelines would be more understandable if they included events from students' own lives, and one noted that her mentor kept a classroom timeline with birthdays of people in the classroom and important events

at the school. But given their perception that students had seriously limited relevant experiences, interns had few specific suggestions for how to build on prior knowledge.

Participants' Views at the End of the Term

By the end of the term, the way participants talked about teaching and learning had changed in several important ways. They still emphasized difficulties children had in learning social studies, and indeed, the interviews had alerted some of them to new instances of students' failure to understand or retain information that had been covered in class. But the nature of children's answers had in some cases challenged interns' ideas about what they did and did not know, and this appeared to help them recognize more completely their own role in developing students' understanding. Whereas they had initially resigned themselves to this lack of understanding—by explaining it as the result of inadequate cognitive development, lack of background knowledge, or curricular irrelevance—and had little to say about implications for teaching, they now spoke almost entirely in terms of their newfound recognition of appropriate instructional techniques in social studies. They spent far less time trying to explain away students' failures, and much more time describing how they had begun to—and would continue to—emphasize conceptual understanding, build on students' background knowledge, and establish the relevance of the curriculum.

Children's Understanding of Social Studies

Several participants noted the impact of the assignment in helping them gain a more accurate understanding of what students knew and how they reasoned. As one explained, she found that students have less knowledge than she expected "in some areas, and in other areas they have more knowledge than I thought." One was particularly surprised by her students' narrow understanding of economic information: "The children I interviewed had virtually no idea about economics...They believed that the store owner or the clerk was the one who was responsible for determining the price. That was all they knew...They don't have any concept of how price is determined and where the money goes after it leaves their hand." Others were surprised by students'

limited understanding of the presidency: One noted, "Mine had very limited knowledge on what the President does: 'He opens gates to the people' like were my answers," while another observed, ""My kids had no idea how the President was elected; I mean, they think they're selected through TV on Nickleodean." Children's lack of geographic knowledge was another area of concern: "They knew that they lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, and that it was in the United States, but any other state, any other city, state, or country, they couldn't get in order. They knew Kentucky, they had heard of it, but they didn't know that it was a state." Still others were surprised by students' inability to name famous women from history, or to name famous people from outside the United States.

In other areas, students knew more than participants had expected, and this was particularly evident when they asked children to arrange historical pictures in chronological order. As one noted, "I was surprised at how much my students did know and the things that they actually used to tend to determine their time periods...They knew that back in the days with covered wagons that the ladies wore really long dresses and they'd never wear pants, and then they kind of related it to now, and how women can wear slacks." Another observed, "It was interesting that all of the students were able to put the pictures in order correctly. And just as a teacher I would have never thought that the students would have had...the factual knowledge to be able to do this, and it was amazing to me to see that they could pull other things, such as like, the clothing, and the hairstyles, and just from their type of transportation—use that to get them in order. I mean these are first graders."

The language of developmental readiness and the limitations of students' thinking abilities were entirely absent from the second set of interviews. Instead, participants often suggested the possibility of building on children's prior knowledge to take them to new levels of understanding. A first-grade intern observed, "A lot of our students already knew a lot about Martin Luther King, just from Kindergarten year, and just from being in the culture that my students are, they knew a lot, so I realized that we could have gone past that, and done more with them and brought them up to a level where they could have been doing maybe some research on their own, even in the first grade, because they already had the information." Similarly, describing students' ability to order pictures chronologically, one participant noted, "I thought that was pretty interesting that they could do that" and explained that her idea of the starting point for historical instruction had changed—she now

knew that she didn't have to supply an endless amount of information, because students "have so much of it themselves that they can put into it, so that was special for me."

Implications for Teaching

Participants in the final set of focus group interviews talked about the process of teaching differently than they had earlier. As noted above, they already knew that students did not always learn what was taught, and this assignment confirmed that much of the social studies instruction during the year "went in one ear and out the other," as one intern put it. But they explained how the assignment had not only given them specific information on children's knowledge, but had enhanced their recognition of the necessity of seeking out children's prior ideas. One explained, "I just found out that I'm not gonna assume anything when I teach. Not that I really did before, but this really let me see that. A lot of times I had no idea what a student might think about this, or what a student would think about that. So I think now especially with social studies, I'm gonna look a lot more towards making sure I get at what they already know." Similarly, one intern noted, "I know when I go into my position next year, whatever grade it is, I think I will really find out first what the students know each time. You know you have to have that starting point and know, 'Okay, this topic they know nothing about, and this topic they know everything about,' and so kind of gauge that." Another agreed: "I was thinking just starting off with like KWL charts or webs, expand on their ideas."

Conceptual understanding. Participants had initially focused on finding better ways to transmit information—particularly by making learning fun—but they now emphasized developing students' conceptual understanding. One explained, "This project has helped me see that social studies isn't just presenting kids with information and expecting them to regurgitate a project or report—which is what I did in school—but that it's more like individual lessons that you're going to do to bring them to an understanding of social studies and how they're going to see themselves." As one explained,

> I chose the topic of Martin Luther King because I knew they had some interests and knowledge....I could build on that through literature, and I got ideas of books I could use to make them understand his "I Have a Dream" speech in more than just the

> words, but how it relates and what the meaning is, and then have them maybe create their own speeches to know what it feels like to create something that you believe in.

Another intern explained the importance of helping students in "researching their own information, rather than just giving it to them...I think as a teacher in my own classroom one of the first things that I'll do is establish those [research] skills so that they can find the information." And still another described her changing understanding of teaching by describing an extensive role play based on research with the book *Immigrant Kids* (Freedman, 1980):

> It opened their eyes to really how it was, and it was so refreshing even for us [teachers], because it wasn't just reading the book, doing some worksheets...I think they'll retain that, you know, and that's something that they'll remember and they'll always have that idea....and we did afterwards compare and contrast, you know those kinds of things, but it was really neat to see them, 'cause I think they really had that strong idea.

Building on background knowledge. As several of the quotes above indicate, participants now recognized that students did indeed have prior knowledge that could be built on. Their newfound appreciation for the potential of students' experiences was perhaps the most striking change from the first to second set of focus group discussions. In the initial discussions, participants recognized the role of prior knowledge, but because they perceived students as having few experiences relevant to learning social studies, they could see few opportunities for building on their previous understanding; they saw students' backgrounds almost entirely as a deficit. In this project, though, interns discovered that children did indeed have relevant knowledge and experience, and that these could be used to develop the conceptual understandings required in the curriculum. One participant described her changing perspective this way:

> Some of the students I chose were really low achievers and kids that didn't seem to be very interested in social studies class, and I picked them on purpose to see how they were doing. And it helped me because I felt like they knew that I cared about what they were thinking. And from that point on they did show a little more effort, or

> at least a little more interest, because they knew I cared what they thought. And it gave me a more positive attitude toward them for myself—just that they did know more than I thought they did, and so that helped to start rapport, which for those students is everything in terms of how they are during the day, how they feel they relate to you.

Later in the interview, she returned to the transforming effects of this experience on teachers' and students' perceptions of each other. She explained:

> I think that I've learned that I need to shut up and let them talk more. I keep going back to the students who don't show me as much in class what they know, or aren't able to articulate it in the whole group setting. When they came in at lunch [to do the interviews], it was like they were doing me this big favor, and I was valuing them as an expert and letting them talk and not telling them whether they were right or wrong, just going, "Uh huh, uh huh," and it was great! And they told me more than I've heard from them all year.

Similarly, another intern described how she had learned that students were already familiar with important, instructionally relevant information:

> One thing I noticed about how they understand history is my African American students were very much aware of how they would have been perceived in that different era, or how their life would have been different if they lived [then]. They would say, "People wouldn't like me 'cause I was Black, or they wouldn't give me a job, or I might have been a slave." I mean, they were very aware of their cultural history, which is great—that someone had been talking about that with them and that they were, they could identify with people in the time period. So I was really impressed, actually.

Creating curricular relevance. Perhaps because they now recognized not only the importance of background knowledge but also the rich potential in the backgrounds of their own students, participants at the end of the term consistently described successful teaching in terms of their ability to help students *relate* to the content—by which they meant both the process of relating

assignment, and the final focus group discussions indicate that the project may have had a significant impact on their understanding of teaching and learning in social studies.

The most noticeable difference between initial and final focus group discussions was a shift away from the emphasis on shortcomings in students or curriculum, and toward a recognition of the teachers' role in developing students' understanding. Instead of assuming that social studies was inherently boring or irrelevant for young children, teachers at the end of the term had begun to focus on ways to make the curriculum relevant, particularly by helping students see the "big picture" or by making connections to the human element of the subject. Interns also had dropped the language of cognitive ability or readiness and focused instead on ways they could assist students in developing conceptual understanding at any age; they also recognized that familiarity with factual information did not necessarily indicate that students had developed such understanding. Most importantly, both these changes were related to another critical transformation in interns' thinking—their understanding of the role of background knowledge. In the initial focus group discussions, interns talked about the importance of background knowledge, but they saw it almost exclusively in terms of deficiency: Those who taught in urban settings believed that their students had little or no background knowledge or relevant experiences, and so they saw nothing they could build on. But the interview project had alerted them to the range and depth of children's knowledge in some areas, and so by the time of the final discussions they were more likely to focus on the opportunities presented by children's backgrounds. In these discussions, interns talked about the importance of always finding out what their students know, and capitalizing on that knowledge in order both to develop their conceptual understanding and to help them more fully appreciate the relevance of what they are studying.

This study has a number of obvious limitations. First, it is based on interviews with a small number of interns who had volunteered for the study; the self-selected nature of the sample suggests that this group of participants was unlikely to be representative of the larger population of interns in the program or of beginning teachers more generally. Second, the design was that of a single-shot, pretest/posttest quasi-experiment; there was no control group and, most importantly, no way of separating out the effects of participant maturation over the course of the study. Any number of

variables other than participation in the project, therefore, may have influenced interns' changing ideas about social studies—most notably, the additional term of experience they had gained, their participation in a methods class which continually stressed the importance of background knowledge and conceptual understanding, and their weekly readings in two different texts which complemented the focus of the course. And finally, the analysis in this paper is based on group data from each focus group discussion; that is, there was no attempt to identify changing responses at the level of individual participants, nor was than an attempt to break down the data to identify relationships between interns' responses and their grade levels or schools. There might be important differences in how beliefs changed based on whether interns taught at the primary or upper elementary levels, whether they taught more affluent or less affluent students, or whether their students were primarily from minority or of European American backgrounds.

But although the design of the study permits no very certain conclusions about the effectiveness of this particular intervention, it nonetheless suggests some features of the relationship between beginning teachers' beliefs about children's thinking in the social studies and their ideas about effective instruction, and it points to potentially productive avenues both for the professional development of new teachers and for further research into teachers' thinking. It indicates, for example, that at least some new teachers recognize that social studies is taken less seriously in schools than other subjects, and that children do not always retain the content that has been covered in class. More importantly, it suggests that as teachers try to come to grips with these issues, their initial response may be to identify inadequacies in students or in the curriculum—inadequacies they are powerless to overcome—rather than to develop teaching strategies focused on the development of conceptual understanding. Further research might examine the specific conditions under which teachers form these explanations—the nature of the experiences that give rise to their beliefs about children's thinking, for example, or the range of explanations they develop and their relationship to classroom contexts or other influences. For university faculty or others charged with educating new teachers, though, this research suggests that one effective way to confront teachers' initial explanations may be through structured experiences designed to provide direct evidence that challenges their assumptions about children's thinking.

Appendix 2

Protocol for focus group interviews

First focus group interview

Explain that the purpose of the interview is to find out what they already know about children's understanding of social studies based on their experiences so far, and to find out what things they have questions about or wonder about regarding children's understanding of social studies.

Have participants identify themselves, their schools, and the grade levels they teach.

1. What are some of the social studies topics you've taught about so far this year?
2. What things have you been successful at in teaching social studies so far?
3. What things have children had the most trouble understanding in social studies?
4. What are your observations so far about your students' understanding of history? Can you explain why you think it is that they have (or lack) that understanding?
5. What are your observations so far about your students' understanding of geography? Can you explain why you think it is that they have (or lack) that understanding?
6. Have you learned anything about your students' understanding of government or citizenship? Can you explain why you think it is that they have (or lack) that understanding?
7. Have you learned anything about your students' understanding of government or citizenship? Can you explain why you think it is that they have (or lack) that understanding?
8. What would you like to know more about in relation to children's understanding of social studies? What do you wonder about?

Second focus group interview

Explain that the purpose of this interview is to find out how the project with children influenced their ideas about children's understanding of social studies, how they think they benefited from the project, and how they think the project could be improved.

Have participants identify themselves, their schools, and the grade levels they teach.

1. What do you think are the most important things you learned from your interview project with students?
2. What surprised you the most about their understanding of the different social studies topics you asked them about?
3. How have your ideas about children's understanding of history changed as a result of the project?
4. How have your ideas about children's understanding of geography changed as a result of the project?
5. How have your ideas about children's understanding of economics changed as a result of the project?
6. How have your ideas about children's understanding of government changed as a result of the project?
7. What effect do you think this project will have on the way you teach social studies (either this year or the future)?
8. What changes would you make in the project?
9. What do you think were the most beneficial aspects of the project for your own professional development?
10. What would you like to know more about with regard to children's understanding of social studies?

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