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Teaching History for Citizenship in the Elementary School. ERIC Digest.

A substantial amount of research and curriculum development completed over the past two decades can be used to improve the teaching of history to young children. This Digest discusses (1) insights from recent research, (2) insights from recent curriculum development, and (3) connections of research to curriculum development. A list of Web sites which may be used to enhance elementary teachers' history-for-citizenship lessons is provided.

INSIGHTS FROM RECENT RESEARCH.

Recent studies on the teaching of history to young children have investigated the development of children's conceptions of historical time (e.g., Barton and Levstik, 1996; Hoge, 1991), children's ability to construct historical narratives (Barton, 1997; Levstik and Pappas, 1987), and their explanations of historical change over time and their ability to interpret, sequence, and date historical events and images (Barton and Levstik, 1996; Foster, Hoge and Rosch, 1999). The following are generalizations selected from the conclusions of this body of research.
Brophy and VanSledright (1997, 23) found that even the youngest elementary students have a sense of history and often bring prior conceptions of the past into the classroom. They note that young students typically have trouble retaining historical information that has not been situated within a context and linked to a prior understanding. They conclude that a barren, textbook-centered approach that treats history as a thin narrative of events that simply happened may prevent students from "developing the critical, interpretive, and synthetic thinking abilities required for cultivating historical understanding."

Barton's research (1997, 13-16) also revealed that young students, even kindergartners, possess some accurate historical knowledge; for example, that covered wagons came before cars. Older elementary students demonstrate similar understandings -- often gained without formal history instruction -- about clothing, technology, and architecture. Barton determined, however, that pre-fifth grade students "have a very limited understanding of the nature and purpose of the government, politics, and economic institutions." He also found that even when students in the intermediate grades do study these topics, "They tend to interpret them solely in terms of the actions and desires of individuals, and to misunderstand or ignore the role of government and economics." Barton notes that elementary-grade-level students typically know very little about the methods used by historians in the creation of their narratives and, perhaps as a result, uncritically accept printed historical accounts as the truth.

Many of the aforementioned themes are echoed in Wilson's (2001, 530) review of research on history instruction which concludes, among other things, that students generally find traditional history teaching dry and largely senseless, resulting in "little intellectual engagement, a dominance of teachers and textbooks, and minimal problem solving or critical thinking." Wilson also noted that even teachers who know more about history and historical methods often abandon their more sophisticated understandings

and the goal of creating greater student engagement under the pressures of coverage, high-stakes testing, scheduling, and parents' expectations.

Wineburg's comprehensive review of research on history instruction (1996) led him to conclude (a) that despite a lack of school-based instruction, students are hardly blank slates when it comes to historical knowledge, (b) that the historical and conceptual background knowledge of fifth graders is typically quite sketchy, (c) that adolescents can develop a sophisticated form of historical understanding, (d) that there has been little appreciable change in the level of students' historical knowledge over the past 80 years, (e) that historical knowledge develops slowly and comes from sources other than just school, and (f) that discrete and unrelated bits of historical knowledge often get incorrectly conflated. Wineburg's later research (2001) showed that historical thinking was not a natural process and that it would not arise automatically from normal cognitive development.

INSIGHTS FROM RECENT CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT.

Over the past two decades, educators identified national curriculum standards for all subject areas and the development of history instruction standards took center stage in the effort to strengthen K-12 social studies instruction. The Center for History in the Schools' (1996) standards begin with a statement on the importance of teaching history for the development of citizenship, a theme that dominates all of their widely circulated and often emulated curriculum documents. In addition, the National Standards for Civics and Government (1994) refer to history as a means of educating America's youth for their future demanding roles as citizens of a modern democracy. Key scholars such as R. Freeman Butts and Paul Gagnon also have stressed the importance of powerfully taught history as an essential subject in the schools of any nation that wishes to be called and to remain a democracy.

CONNECTING RESEARCH AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT.

A common theme running through these organizations' and experts' authoritative endorsements is that teachers need to do more than simply transmit factual knowledge about the past. Powerful history instruction involves helping students (a) acquire a meaningful understanding of key historical themes and important people and events from local, state, and national history, (b) build experience-based knowledge of the methods and limitations of history, and (c) confront multiple perspectives -- including mainstream interpretations -- of the past. These may be thought of as the fundamentals of good history instruction. Furthermore, while employing the fundamentals of good history instruction, teachers must offer students substantial and recurring opportunities to think analytically about a variety of democratic values, principles, issues, and

tensions, using historical referents as a basis for such lessons. This type of history learning requires more than mere exposure and memorization, it demands active manipulation of the concepts through learning mechanisms such as dramatization activities (e.g., role playing an interview with a famous American, acting in skits or plays that recreate famous events); advocacy activities (e.g., making posters that use historical precedents as support for positions on contemporary issues, writing letters about community needs to public officials); community service projects (e.g., helping to restore the condition of a local monument, using oral history techniques to create a school history) and issues-oriented discussions (e.g., were the courts right in declaring separate public schools for black and white children to be illegal?).

INTERNET RESOURCES FOR HISTORY TEACHERS.

The following Web sites provide an array of easy-to-use history teaching materials:
The Web site of the National Initiative on American History, Civics, and Service provides access to many original documents: http://www.ourdocuments.gov/

The History Net provides articles on history from leading writers and historians: http://www.thehistorynet.com/

The National Council for History Education's "History Links" page links to a variety of history-related Web sites: http://www.history.org/nche/

The official National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Web site offers history/social science lesson plans and resources available through its subject catalogue and extensive list of links: http://edsitement.neh.gov/

REFERENCES AND ERIC RESOURCES.

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche, paper, or electronic full text from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; World Wide Web <edrs.com>; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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