

“Exploring Complexity Within a “Best Story” of U. S. History:  
Kernels of Inquiry in a Fifth-Grade Class”

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When students learn about history in elementary schools across the United States, they take tests and write essays explaining what happened in the past. It is not clear, however, that students necessarily *think about* history. Yet if students know dates and names but not the meanings of events or how those events connect to other events, they have only learned a small portion of the story. Teachers, therefore, need to help students think about history.

To think about history is to reason critically and morally about the ideas and actions of people in the past. Rather than simply labeling actions or events as good or bad, students analyze details of events and ideas so that they can make sophisticated judgments about the past. To do so requires that students, like historians, engage in close, careful reading of historical texts, and connect ideas that are not explicitly linked. More broadly, historical thinking involves examining the multiple—and constantly changing—dimensions and meanings of concepts such as freedom or democracy. Engaging in historical thinking can help students learn how those concepts are both constructed and contested, and how history and the telling of history are full of ambiguities.

Rather than blindly accepting truisms about the past—or the present—learning to think more deeply about history has potential to teach students that every story can be examined. Students can and should, as writer James Baldwin told a group of teachers in 1963, “ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions.”<sup>1</sup> Historical thinking leads students to broaden their view of what counts as knowledge. Instead of swallowing one established narrative of history, they come to know that history is contingent and that they themselves can use evidence to construct historical narratives.

The study of race relations is one important topic in history that lends itself to multiple interpretations, the exploration of various perspectives, and the making of moral judgments. Examining this history requires reckoning with the ways that people have been racialized and the social, economic, and political impact of those processes. One must take into account how actions and perspectives are influenced by the racial positions of the actors. Moreover, because race overlays with class and gender,

the history of race relations involves myriad complicating factors. Studying the history of race relations, therefore, necessitates addressing a web of complex and morally ambiguous events and views of the past. Slavery in the United States, for example, was not simply a morally repugnant practice; it was a politically, economically, and socially complex institution in which various individuals and groups had nuanced motivations, justifications, and fears that changed over time.

What might happen, then, if students were to study race relations in history? How might elementary students in particular learn to grapple with the complexity of race relations? Would the topic open doors to thinking more deeply about history?

Learning to think historically is not an easy task, particularly for elementary students. In order to understand how teachers can help students learn to think historically, and to see what happens when students study race relations in history, I examined the discussions that took place in a fifth grade class studying colonial U.S. history. In this article I describe the ways the teacher both offered students a predetermined view of the history of race relations in the colonial era as well as how she helped them think historically about some of that history. My goal in this research was to answer the following questions: First, in what ways did the fifth grade students discuss the complexity of race relations in history? Second, what processes or approaches might help the students comprehend, analyze, and interpret the history of race relations?

### The Study of Race Relations

“Race,” wrote James Anderson, “has been a major ideology in American life and culture since the colonial era.”<sup>2</sup> The history of the United States is replete with examples of how the creation, evolution, and maintenance of racial distinctions have influenced society. The constructions of race, for example, have shaped the histories of slavery, colonialism, and globalization. From the first encounters between Europeans and Native Americans, alliances and animosities between racialized individuals and across racialized groups have influenced the social, political, and economic fabric of the country. Such coalitions in turn impact the ways that race—as well as class, gender, and region—are defined and used.

Although the study of race relations in history has not been exhaustive, in the last forty years historians have come to describe a rich history of interactions between and among racial groups in the

United States.<sup>3</sup> They deliberate on how people have created, resisted, and enforced racial distinctions.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of early U.S. history, historians describe how political, social, and economic relationships among whites, Native Americans, and blacks in particular are connected to the establishment of the American colonies.<sup>5</sup> Relationships among enslaved people and their owners were complicated, and those relationships influenced the history of the country.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, historians have studied how notions of freedom have been played out against a backdrop of racial discrimination and how progress toward racial justice has been achieved and thwarted.<sup>7</sup> Of particular interest here are historians' comments on the contradiction between the rhetoric of the American Revolution and the existence of slavery in the colonies.<sup>8</sup> Historian Gary Nash, for example, points out the hypocrisy of white colonists' protests against British rule and describes how African Americans turned that rhetoric on its head to fight for their own freedom.<sup>9</sup>

While historians have made inroads in examining the complex history of race relations in U.S. history, in several ways teachers, particularly teachers of elementary students, often do not help students address this history. One problem is that teachers often disregard race relations entirely.<sup>10</sup> Second, they sometimes only focus on victims of discrimination rather than looking at relationships among racial groups. In particular, teachers often ignore the role of whites in perpetuating discrimination.<sup>11</sup> A third problem is that teachers may address the moral dimensions of race relations but ignore the political or institutional aspects.<sup>12</sup> Racism, for example, is taught as morally wrong. But it is not clear how whites benefit from racism or how the enforcement of laws and other social practices maintains racist systems. Teachers do not show students how to examine, as W.E.B. DuBois described, the "wages of whiteness."<sup>13</sup> Fourth, in most classrooms students do not learn that race is a social construct.<sup>14</sup> They do not examine how the idea of race came to be or how its meanings have changed.

### Teaching Historical Thinking Skills

Educational theorists suggest—and national history standards require—that students should learn historical thinking skills such as comprehension, analysis, and interpretation. At a basic comprehension level, students need to "read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals involved—their probable motives, hopes, fears,

strengths, and weaknesses.”<sup>15</sup> In addition to reading others’ accounts, students should do their own research in which they “pose, investigate, and at least tentatively answer historical questions and develop historical explanations and interpretations.”<sup>16</sup>

In doing this history, students should view the past as much as possible on its own terms rather than judging history using present-day values.<sup>17</sup> In addition, students should consider multiple perspectives on events while understanding that every account involves the bias of the author or creator of that account. Furthermore, students should examine how knowledge is constructed.<sup>18</sup> How do we come to define terms in the way that we do?

Building on the comprehension and analysis of history, students who think historically also should consider the ethical dimensions of controversies and “analyze the values that inform [their] moral judgment.”<sup>19</sup> To help students engage in a critical inquiry of history, teachers must, according to the *National Standards*, “take into account the processes through which students acquire the complex skills of principled thinking and moral reasoning.”<sup>20</sup>

One place to facilitate the process of developing historical thinking skills is in class discussions. Talk allows students to articulate new ideas that have not been completely formed. As Vygotsky explained, “Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. It is not expressed but completed in the word.”<sup>21</sup> Talking with others helps students “complete” their thoughts.<sup>22</sup> Talking in a group has particular power. By talking with their teachers and peers, students can build on others’ ideas, gradually, if haltingly, demonstrating more sophisticated understandings. In addition, discussion can allow students to pose questions in a way that many written assignments (answering questions in a textbook, for example) do not. As Levstik and Barton point out, “By talking historically, students ... can negotiate meaning, try out ideas, keep or discard them—jointly making sense of history.”<sup>23</sup>

There is some evidence that elementary students can address serious historical controversies.<sup>24</sup> Levstik and Barton describe the characteristics of a community of inquiry in which students are likely to be able to take on serious historical thinking. In these communities, “conversation focuses on questions and tasks worthy of sustained discussion” and “there is lively conversation and intellectual negotiation among participants.”<sup>25</sup> Importantly for this research, students use new information along with prior knowledge to understand a difficult topic.

Yet despite the arguments for students developing historical thinking skills, teachers often present students with history as a fixed narrative. The “best story about the past,” as Seixas calls it, can be any story: a rendition of history as the story of progress, for example, or a counternarrative such as a history focused on women’s lives.<sup>26</sup> With such a story, students do not construct historical interpretations; they simply take in the account of the past as it is being told to them.<sup>27</sup> Seixas argues that such an approach leaves little room for understanding either the disciplinary nature of history or the uncertainty of the historian’s craft.<sup>28</sup>

### Research Setting

To examine what happens when students talk about race relations in U.S. history, I took my research into a public elementary school in New York City. I conducted participant observation research with the same group of students beginning in the fourth grade and continuing into the fifth grade (ages 9-12). The class had approximately twenty-five students. Attendance fluctuated because students were frequently added to and removed from the class by school administrators. The class reflected the general make-up of the school. The approximately 750 students in the school were almost 57 percent Hispanic, almost 43 percent black, and less than 1 percent Asian or Native American; almost 98 percent of the students were eligible for free lunch.<sup>29</sup> In the class there were, however, a disproportionate number of students (20 percent) who used special education services: one student was mainstreamed, three students were in an inclusion program, and another student received resource room assistance. Overall only 4.4 percent of the students in the school were in special education part time.

In 2001, the school did not meet the expected level of performance established by the state in English language arts. Less than a quarter of the students in the school met the English language arts standards as measured on the citywide reading test and the statewide language arts test. On these exams about a quarter of the students tested far below the standard (performance level 1 on a scale of 4). By test measurement alone, these were not successful students, and as a result there was a disproportionate emphasis on language arts and mathematics instruction in the week so as to prepare students for the tests.

Lorenza Agosto, the teacher in the class, had been teaching for four years, all of them at the

school.<sup>30</sup> She had a master's degree in education and a reputation in the school for being tough and effective in working with students. She identified herself as Puerto Rican or Hispanic.

My role in the class during these discussions was one of a moderate participant observer: I occasionally offered comments and asked or answered questions while I was videotaping the class.<sup>31</sup> I am a white university professor. The students called me Ms. Bolgatz. They described me as a cross between a teacher and a friend. I went to the class once or twice a week during a 100-minute English language arts block for much of the class' 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade years.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

In order to get a range of perspectives, the study included a variety of data sources. I audiotaped and videotaped and later transcribed class discussions. I kept a researcher's journal in which I described participants and their interactions, the setting, and my personal reflections on the class activities. Informally during and after class, as well as in formal taped sessions during the students' lunch and free periods, I interviewed students, individually and in small groups, as well as the teacher.

To make sense of the data, I made notes from all of the above. I went through the data and identified places where the instruction could be seen as related to historical thinking and when the teacher seemed to be pursuing a "best story" approach. I organized portions of the transcripts and individual statements into categories related to my research questions and coded all relevant transcripts. Some examples of my coding categories were "connection" when a speaker connected a fact or idea to another fact; "evidence" when a speaker asked for or offered evidence for an argument; "hypothesizing" when a speaker asked for or offered a hypothesis; and "pursue" when the teacher pursued a question.

Several discussions involving "best stories" and historical thinking took place during the whole class read-aloud of Clinton Cox's (1999) chapter book *Come All You Brave Soldiers: Blacks in the Revolutionary War*.<sup>32</sup> The discussions took place in October of the second year I visited the class. I analyzed seven segments of those discussions (anywhere from 3 to 11 minutes in duration) that were particularly loaded with codes related to thinking historically. I drew tentative conclusions and then went back and searched for counterexamples to those conclusions.

### Organization of the Findings

In this article I describe excerpts from three discussions about Cox's book. I use the first discussion, about a mass grave of black Revolutionary War soldiers, to show how Agosto used a "best story" approach. I return to that discussion and the two others to illustrate the way the class talked about race relations in U.S. history and the processes that Agosto used to encourage historical thinking. The second discussion is about a slave owner who advised officials to kill slaves who might join the British army. The third discussion is about a parallel between the colonists' fight for freedom from Britain and the slaves' fight for freedom from slave owners.

### Telling a "Best Story"

Although many of her lessons dealt with race and race relations, Agosto often seemed intent on leading the students to conclusions about a particular interpretation of history. Hers wasn't necessarily traditional history—she often directed students to focus on the inequities of the colonial era rather than glorify the heroism or righteousness of the revolution— but it was, as Seixas labeled, a "best story" approach.<sup>33</sup> Inasmuch as she helped students question their textbook's conception of the Revolutionary War as a purely democratic initiative, she was introducing multiple perspectives, but she usually told students that they were simply learning more, rather than pointing out that they were studying different perspectives.

One example of leading the students to a "best story" understanding was when Agosto focused on a passage about the treatment of the remains of a group of black Revolutionary War soldiers. Cox loosely sketches the events, relying primarily on one nineteenth century source, Reverend Theodore Parker, whom Cox describes as a theologian and social reformer.

The passage explains that, "according to evidence found seventy-five years later," black soldiers had been buried in a mass grave separately from white soldiers after the Battle of Brooklyn in 1776.<sup>34</sup> When the grave was later dug up so that a store could be built, workers found a number of skulls. Cox quotes Parker: The bones were "carted off, and shot into the sea, as the rubbish of the town. Had they been white men's relics, how would they have been honored."

After asking several questions to get students to summarize the literal meaning of the passage,

Agosto led the conversation so that students would see that there was discrimination. She acted out the roles of the people who found and threw away the bones, and repeatedly asked students what they thought of the treatment, forcefully reinforcing the notion that blacks were treated like garbage.

Agosto: Ok, so how did they honor- What do you think about the way they *honored* the black soldiers, the remains, the bones of the black soldiers? We just found out that they carted them off. They found these bones, they loaded them up- they... (Acting out the action) put them on something and went to the sea and dumped them.

Student: Ugh!

Agosto: What do you think about that?

Student: I think it's unfair.

Agosto: Ok, let's try to stay away so much from the word "unfair." We already know there was unfair treatment. But what else?

Jessica: It's discriminating.

Agosto; It's discriminating how?

Jessica: 'Cause, like you said, if it would have been the whites, they wouldn't have done that. They would have honored them in a different way.

Agosto: How do you know they didn't honor the black soldiers by throwing their bones into the sea?

Jessica: 'Cause they could have made up a museum for it or something.

Student: Yeah.

Jessica: And they only do it without cause.

Agosto: The cause was to try to get rid of them.

Jessica: I mean, yeah, exactly, but if they fought in the war, why would they do that?

Agosto: So, you're saying these are people that fought in the war; they died in the war, they were buried, you go, you find their bones, and did you think about them as you just throw them in the sea? What does that remind you of? (Pause) When you throw someone- How are you treating them? What are you doing? When you throw something away, what is it?

Students: Garbage. Trash.



“Best story” teaching involved Agosto strongly suggesting to students what to conclude about the history they were reading.

#### Getting at Historical Thinking

While she often proffered a “best story” to students, Agosto was also quick to pursue ambiguous sections of the text and to follow students’ lead when they asked interesting questions or came up with provocative comments. In those discussions she gave students opportunities to talk and pushed them to think for themselves.

In this section I describe how Agosto acted as a co-constructor of history, helped students hypothesize about possible meanings of the text, and pushed for close, careful readings. In the process, I describe how the students began to unpack the construction of race, analyze multiple perspectives, address the complexity of slave ownership, and make thoughtful connections about the colonial era.

#### Teacher as Co-constructor of History

Agosto helped students interrogate history by being genuinely curious. She co-constructed with students, asking questions and fleshing out and building on students’ responses. One example of Agosto’s willingness to engage in historical inquiry with students was in the conversation about the mass graves described above. The discussion took a marked turn when a student, Jennifer, asked how the townspeople would have known the bones were those of black people. The question interested Agosto and she pursued it:

Jennifer: But how did they know that it was blacks, not whites?

...

Agosto: That’s a really good question! Wait! One at a time. Because that’s a really good question.

That’s a really good- If we’re all humans, and after our body decomposes—remember it just rots...and just a skeleton—don’t we all look alike?

Students: Yes.

Agosto: Then how did they know? Well, how do you think they could have known that these were-

? [She had a puzzled look on her face.] I don’t know if I really know the answer to that,

but I'm going to say let's come up with some ideas.

Some of the liveliest discussions that involved historical thinking were when Agosto demonstrated enthusiasm for a student's question or idea.

#### Hypothesizing: Unpacking the Construction of Race

In response to Agosto's prompting, the class had a long conversation hypothesizing about how they knew that the bones were of black people. Hypothesizing is an important aspect of historical analysis. It allows students to learn that there is more than one way to interpret sources of evidence and that they should "hold interpretations as tentative."<sup>35</sup>

Although they did not articulate it as such, the students in this conversation were unpacking the construction of race: how can we know that a person is of a particular race? This is a complicated idea, and an important one to understand because racism is based in part on the assumption that racial categories are real. Although Agosto did not raise the discussion to that metacognitive level, the class still explored the ideas.

The students came up with several hypotheses about how the blacks might have been identified. Along with biological ideas (hair color differences, DNA tests, and the impressions of faces left on material that might have covered the bodies) they noted several possible material explanations. Their suggestions hinted at the economic positions of blacks in society and therefore at the larger idea of social hierarchy. Jason suggested the townspeople could have known because of the clothes on the dead bodies. Ramon wondered if there might have been a gravestone on the grave; Yvette proposed that the soldiers could have been wearing wigs.

When Simon asked, "What if the white people had jewelry?" the class associated the material evidence with blacks' economic positions in society. I asked Simon why he thought whites would have jewelry, and Robert argued that "they were rich...Some white people were rich."

Agosto made the association explicitly: "Okay. Possible, possible. So you're saying the whites had money, they had jewelry, and that's how you could tell because they had material things that the blacks did not?" The connection was rudimentary, but clear. A moment later Peticia suggested that the number of people in each grave would have indicated which was the blacks' grave. Agosto requested

further explanation for Peticia's statement—modeling the need for evidence in order to construct a historical interpretation—and Peticia was able herself to make the connection:

Peticia: Maybe the white [grave] would only have a few [people that were in it], and black would have a lot.

Agosto: Why would that be the case? I'm not saying it's right or wrong. I just want to know why would you say that.

Peticia: Because blacks wasn't treated equally as the whites. They didn't have the same [things] as whites.

How did historians know what they claimed to know? The text simply stated that the graves were unearthed. Jennifer's question opened the door to the looking at the credibility and authority of the text they were reading, a necessary aspect of conducting historical research.

#### Close Careful Reading

To get the students to talk substantively about race relations, the teacher chose an ambitious historical text, *Come All You Brave Soldiers*, and drew students' attention to ambiguous passages. She invited interpretations and continually went back to the text. In one discussion, Agosto had been reading about colonists' reactions to Governor Lord Dunmore's proclamation in 1775 offering freedom to blacks willing to join the British troops. She focused on one particular sentence: "Henry Laurens, a South Carolina slave owner who would soon be elected president of the Second Continental Congress, advised officials 'to seize & if nothing else will do to destroy all those Rebellious slaves,' even though he thought such an action would be 'an awful business.'"<sup>36</sup>

The discussion of the Laurens passage is a good example of helping students read a document carefully. After reading about Laurens once, Agosto stopped and asked forcefully, "What does *that* mean? What do you *think* that means? Mariah? (Pause.) I'll read it again. You gotta be prepared to share an opinion." She then read the sentence again.

Agosto continually asked students to clearly articulate their reasoning. When students offered an answer to a question, Agosto followed up with more probing questions. She wanted them to give evidence from the text to justify or refine their answers, as can be seen in the following exchange with

one student, Mariah:

Agosto: When you say he is going to make the slaves do a lot of things, what do you mean by that?

Mariah: He wants them to do a lot of work.

Agosto (repeating): He wants them to do a lot of work. And what clues did you get from this passage? If he's going to destroy the slaves, will he benefit?

Mariah: [unclear]

Agosto: It says, "if nothing else will do to destroy the slaves." How are the slaves going to do something for him if he destroys them?

Mariah's interpretation that Laurens wanted the slaves to do a lot of work suggests a simplistic understanding of the relationship between slaves and their owners: the owner wants the slave to work hard. Mariah ignored the notion that Laurens wants slaves to be killed.

To get students to think more deeply about the passage, Agosto directed them to the text. When Calvin suggested that Laurens was willing to destroy slaves because "Maybe he's tired of owning slaves," Agosto responded by calling the class back to the quotation: "Listen to the last sentence: 'even though he thought such an action would be 'an awful business.' Does that sound like someone who's tired of having slaves?"

#### Hypothesizing: Examining Motivations

Another example of Agosto getting students to hypothesize was during the discussion of Laurens' statement. Sticking to her question of what the sentence meant, Agosto asked for more and more possible interpretations, not offering the students an easy answer. After the beginning suggestions, the students began to grapple with ideas about power and relationships: that blacks were not just passive or docile workers but would rise up and fight against slavery, and that whites might fear losing political power if blacks were freed.

Students' hypothesized about why Laurens would have not wanted the slaves to fight in the Revolutionary War. Students suggested that Laurens might have been scared of slaves fighting against their owners (an idea the class had discussed earlier) or that if the slaves fought in the war they would

gain their freedom (which they had learned from reading that day about Dunmore's proclamation):

Tiffany: Maybe because he knew that the slaves knew how to fight, and he was scared like the others...

Agosto: Maybe he was afraid that the slaves would do some harm. Yes.

Robert: He was [afraid] because if they fought in the war and it finishes, they were going to be free.

It is not clear whether or not the students were attending to the fact that Dunmore wanted the slaves to fight for the British. Nonetheless, they were moving beyond the idea that slaves simply work for their owners. Their answers were starting to explore slavery in terms of slaves having agency: slaves might know how to fight and therefore take up arms against their owners, and slaves would be willing to fight in a war in order to gain their freedom.

In another suggestion, Cordel offered a hypothesis that dealt with the political motivations of the slave owners. Cordel's hypothesis went beyond the text the class had already discussed:

Cordel: Maybe if a slave goes in the army then [Laurens] wouldn't get elected.

Agosto: Oh! Maybe if the slaves were part of the army they would get their feet in, and they would be part of the election process, and they would figure out whether or not this man would become the president of the Second Continental Congress. That's another way of looking at it. Maybe he didn't want them to be able to vote.

Fleshing out Cordel's idea, Agosto acted as a co-constructor of history with the students, rather than telling them the version of the story they should believe.

### Analyzing Multiple Perspectives

In order to understand the political, social, and economic complexity of the institution of slavery students need to examine various viewpoints. In particular, students need to interrogate the actions, viewpoints, and authority of whites if they are to begin to understand the ways race relations are fraught with issues of power.<sup>37</sup> Tiffany, Robert, and Cordel helped the class take into account both the slaves' and the owners' perspectives of slavery.

Perhaps the most striking example of the students thinking carefully about the perspective of slave owners came when, in the final moments of the discussion, a student realized that Laurens might have said that such an action would be “an awful business” for purely economic reasons. Although one might interpret Laurens’ phrase to mean that it was awful to kill human beings when Agosto focused on the fact that Laurens had a particular relationship to the slaves—he owned them—and yet he was willing to destroy them, one student, Brittany, demonstrated a nascent understanding of the economic dimensions of slavery at a particular moment in history:

Agosto: And then when he says this could be awful business, he’s ordering the destruction of these rebellious slaves, although he’s a slave owner! He owns the slave, and yet he’s saying, “Destroy them.” (She claps her hands together.) But he knows this is awful business. What does that mean? That’s what I want you to think about. What does that mean? That’s what I want you to think about. Looking at a slave owner who is willing to destroy slaves rather than have rebellious slaves.

Brittany: Awful business means that then he won’t have any slaves to do his work anymore. He’s not going to have slaves anymore.

#### Addressing the Complexity of Slave Ownership

By articulating the economic dimension of Laurens’ statement, the class got at an important question of the morality of slave ownership. Although not spelled out specifically, the fact that the phrase was interpreted *not* to mean that it was awful to kill enslaved people but that it was awful to have to suffer economically delineates more clearly the economic motivations of slave owners. Agosto reinforced Brittany’s statement by explicitly calling students’ attention to the economic implications of killing slaves: “Yes! Right! Go ahead and destroy them. They’re rebellious. Go ahead and destroy them even though it means it’s going to be bad business for us. Which means, who’s gonna do the work, right? He didn’t care at that moment; he was just really focusing on stopping these slaves from being rebellious. Okay, he was trying to stop them, even if it meant it would affect the business, the business of what slaves do for their white slave owners. He would be affected by that because he owned slaves.”

In schools students are often asked to focus on the evil of slavery. Students learn about the brutal treatment that slaves endured, but they do not learn about the political and economic infrastructures and

implications of the system of slavery.<sup>38</sup> Such a narrow focus allows students not only to miss the institutional aspects of slavery; it also puts the question of morality of slavery in very basic, uncomplicated terms. The students in this class, for instance, unanimously characterized slave owners as lazy. They did not understand that slave owners used slaves for economic gain, or that the system of slavery was maintained because of political fears. It was important to learn, as they started to in this exchange, that racism was not simply a matter of people being mean to each other, but rather that racism was used as a form of social organization.

It is easy just to say slavery was wrong; through this conversation that explored one sentence—the kind of close careful reading of a text that historians engage in—Agosto got students to examine what slave owners were doing in more complicated terms. Why would people own slaves? What were their fears? How far would people be willing to go to maintain slavery? By attending to the complexity of slave ownership, students were poised to address moral ambiguity in history. In addition, they had to move beyond a common, present-minded idea about slavery: the assumption that everyone would know that slavery was wrong.

#### Encouraging Connections

A useful skill that Agosto often reinforced with students was the skill of making connections between what they were learning and what they already knew. The idea of making connections was very familiar to the students. The New York State English Language Arts require students to make connections. Agosto often explicitly asked students to make text-to-text connections, text-to-self connections, and text-to-world connections. When they did so, she often praised them. Making connections is a form of critical historical thinking. When students connect pieces of information, together they are able to “master perplexity” as Levstik and Barton advise.<sup>39</sup>

In a discussion about white southerners’ fears of blacks being armed—“lest our slaves when armed might become our masters” two students made noteworthy connections.<sup>40</sup> Considering the question of slaves having weapons, one student contemplated the ambiguous status of indentured servants. If slaves were going to rise up to fight for their freedom, would indentured servants, whose lives were in some ways similar to slaves’, also want to revolt? “Were they giving indentured servants weapons

to fight [in the Revolutionary War]?” Jessica asked.

Jessica was engaging in the thinking such as thoughtful historians do: interrogating connections between events and ideas. This is a complex skill that we do not often expect of ten-year-olds. Although the connection was not explicit, Jessica’s question invited the examination of the social and economic relationships among white colonists, indentured servants, and slaves. The question opened the door to comparing indentured servitude to slavery.

In the same discussion, another student, Frentrees, pointed out that she saw a connection between the fight for freedom of the colonists and the fight for freedom of the slaves. She actually mirrored the language—“making a connection”—that Agosto used when she would ask students to associate what they were learning with something they had learned previously: “Miss Agosto, this is also making a connection between the war between the British and the (pause), and the colonists, because the British were paying taxes to England, the colonists [she corrects herself. She means the colonists were paying taxes to the British]. It’s the same thing as when the colonists are slaving the blacks. They want liberty so they’re fighting for the liberty.”

Frentree’s comment hinted at the contradiction between the colonists’ argument that all men should be free to govern themselves and their ownership of slaves. Rather than learning about the Revolution as a decidedly positive event, the comment allowed the class to raise a question about the hypocrisy of the colonists’ fighting for freedom while simultaneously supporting slavery.

Frentrees was raising a question to which there is not a clear answer: was the British colonization of the United States similar to the colonists’ enslavement of Africans and African Americans? She repeated the idea that there was a similarity in the struggles of the colonists and the slaves: “[I’m saying] that both the colonists and the slaves are both— were both fighting for liberty because someone else wanted to enslave them.”

The students went on to debate the experience of being colonized relative to being enslaved. One student disagreed with the contention that slavery was similar to taxation without representation. Another argued that the parallel would only be justified if the colonists were unfairly taxed. Taxes on goods, she argued, was not like slavery: “The taxes are for food. But if the British were making them pay taxes just for nothing that would be like slaves.” The class then delineated the kind of taxes that



the colonists had to pay and debated whether it would be more of a problem to have to pay taxes for goods or in order to pay for British troops. Here the students were parsing the institution of slavery, trying to decide how egregious slave ownership was: was it as bad as being taxed unfairly?

#### Discussion about Students

The data from this study demonstrate that all students can practice solid historical thinking skills. The dialogue reveals that students at all levels were beginning to imitate what historians do as they try to make sense of historical documents. Moreover, the dialogue shows that students were able to make sophisticated hypotheses and connections about history. For example, Cordel, a student whom Agosto described as being at a “preschool” reading level, demonstrated keen insight when he proposed that a slave owner might be willing to kill his own slaves so that he could protect himself politically.

The students in Agosto’s class were engaged in the difficult task of understanding the ambiguity of history. Using historical thinking skills, the students began to address the complexities of race relations in U.S. history. Rather than simply labeling slavery as bad or the Revolutionary War as hypocritical, Agosto and her students interrogated sources and in the process looked at the economic, political, and social aspects of relations between blacks and whites in the colonial era.

An implication of this research is that students who are not good readers or are in “failing” schools need not and should not be denied opportunities to engage in challenging lessons about history. City and state measures had determined the students in Agosto’s class to be weak learners. Yet the discussions in the class make clear that these students were perfectly capable of higher-level thinking. How can educators address the basic skills of students while at the same time ensuring that all children have access to rich curricular materials and instruction? Indeed, can they use compelling lessons about history to engage students in thinking about the world around them?

In this study, I found race relations to be an excellent vehicle for students to study historical thinking skills. A question for further study is whether or not learning about race relations provides a particular impetus for the development of historical thinking skills. In particular, are students of color, such as the children in Agosto’s class, more likely to raise compelling questions if they are learning a version of history that views events through a racial lens than studying one that does not? Further, might the

teaching of historical thinking skills, particularly about a subject as provocative as race relations, provoke an interest in obtaining basic skills that many students lack?

#### Discussion about Teaching

Agosto often used Cox's text to explain or reinforce a "best story," showing students that there has been discrimination in U.S. history. However, Agosto interrupted her "best story" when, almost by surprise at times, she pursued questions about the text to which she did not know the answer.<sup>41</sup> In those moments, although Agosto continued to direct and at times dominated the talk in the classroom, she also conveyed a position of being a fellow learner.

In those conversations, Agosto incorporated many of the aspects of Levstik and Barton's "community of inquiry."<sup>42</sup> Agosto demanded that students pay attention to the text, not take its claims for granted, but hypothesize about its meanings and make connections to their prior knowledge. Such investigations, albeit brief, help students realize that there are no easy moral answers in history.

One conclusion we can draw from this research, then, is that telling a "best story" does not necessarily preclude providing students with opportunities to develop historical thinking skills. Although teacher educators want teachers to emphasize historical thinking skills, it may be possible for teachers to help students learn those skills despite the tendency to present students with a "best story."

Agosto helped students to explore possible meanings in history, which is critical to helping students understand that history is constructed. She was not, however, explicitly teaching historical thinking skills. As a result, she did not pursue questions so that students had to evaluate the strength of historical arguments. There was no clear indication of the criteria that might be used, for example, to judge why Laurens would think killing slaves was "an awful business" or whether colonization paralleled slavery. What might have happened if she had taken them further?

A second conclusion is that rather than letting the teaching of historical thinking skills happen as a random epiphenomenon, teachers continually need to learn to teach historical thinking skills. Even if they are focusing on a "best story", their forays into historical investigations would be better informed by a clear vision of what it takes to analyze and interpret historical sources.

Subsequent research might seek to find out whether teachers—teachers of color and white

teachers—find other topics in history conducive to facilitating their students' development of historical thinking skills, and whether that question depends on the race, gender, or class position of the teacher. Such research can reveal more about what it takes to help students become thoughtful about history.

### Conclusion

Although the conclusions drawn in a discussion may seem ephemeral, the shared process of talking together about the complexity and moral ambiguity of history is an important building block for cultivating sophisticated historical thinking skills. In a public forum, students and teachers can ask and respond to each others' questions and build on each others' hypotheses. It is because of their particular setting—as a group in dialogue—that students are able to entertain the idea that there is more than one answer to a question, and indeed more than one question.

If well executed, teaching about race relations in U.S. history using historical thinking skills can foster students' civic capacity. Hypothesizing about the past shows students that significant and varied interests, fears, and motivations affect the way people act and therefore the course of national, local, and private histories. Inasmuch as students can learn to “analyze the range of interests and values held by the many persons caught up in [a] situation and affected by its outcome” they can gain tools to understand some of what it means to live together in a pluralist society.<sup>43</sup>

As Sam Wineburg writes, “Coming to know others, whether they live on the other side of the tracks or the other side of the millennium, requires the education of our sensibilities. This is what history, when taught well, gives us practice doing.”<sup>44</sup> If students have practice ferreting out, analyzing, and judging the complexity of race relations in the past, including investigating the ways that race itself is constructed, they will be better able to understand and mediate the array of interests that vie for attention in a diverse world. Given the racial divides in our society, they will need these skills to navigate paths to a more equitable democracy.

#### NOTES

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2. James D. Anderson, "How We Learn Race through History," in *Learning History in America: Schools, Culture and Politics*, eds. Lloyd Kramer, Donald Reid, and William L. Barney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 87.

3. See, for example, Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993); Nancy Foner and George M. Frederickson, eds., *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004); Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

4. F. James Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); Takaki, *Different Mirror*; Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and

Peter Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

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8. Foner, *Story of American Freedom*; and Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire*.

9. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth*.

10. John S. Wills, "Who Needs Multicultural Education?: White Students, U.S. History, and the Construction of a Usable Past," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 27 (September 1996): 365-89; Audrey Thompson, "For: Anti-Racist Education," *Curriculum Inquiry* 27 (Spring 1997), 7-44; T. Chapman, "Stopping at the Edge of the Cliff: A White Teacher's Attempts at Discussions of Race, Class and Gender in an English Class with a Multi-ethnic, Multi-racial Student Population," paper presented at NCTE Assembly for Research Midwinter Conference, Minneapolis, 2003 (copy in author's possession); G. Ladson-Billings, "Still Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination of Children's and Young Adult Literature Teaching," paper presented at NCTE Assembly for Research Midwinter Conference, Minneapolis, 2003 (copy in author's possession).

11. John S. Wills, "Missing in Interaction: Diversity, Narrative, and Critical Multicultural Social Studies," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 29 (Winter 2001): 43-64.

12. Wills, "Who Needs Multicultural Education?"

13. David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999).

14. Anderson, "How We Learn Race through History," 87-106.

15. National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History* (Los Angeles, 1996), 64.

16. Linda Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 20.

17. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); American Historical Association, *Historical Thinking Benchmarks* <[www.historians.org/teaching/policy/Benchmarks.htm](http://www.historians.org/teaching/policy/Benchmarks.htm)>.

18. *National Standards for History*, James A. Banks, "Transformative Knowledge, Curriculum Reform, and Action," in *Multicultural Education, Transformative Knowledge, and Action: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. James A. Banks (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 335-48.

19. National Council for the Social Studies, *A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy* (NCSS, 2006); and *National Standards for History*, 69.

20. *National Standards for History*, 69.
21. Les S. Vygotskii, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1986), 251.
22. Jane Bolgatz, *Talking Race in the Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).
23. Levstik and Barton, *Doing History*, 22.
24. Ibid.; and Bruce Van Sledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).
25. Levstik and Barton, *Doing History*, 20.
26. Peter Seixas, "Schweigen! Die Kinder! Or, Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools?" in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 19-37.
27. Thomas C. Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1990).
28. Seixas, "Schweigen! Die Kinder!"
29. In the 2002-2003 school year children from a family of four qualified for free lunch if the household income was less than U.S. \$23,530.
30. The names of the teacher and students are pseudonyms they chose for themselves.
31. James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980).
32. The teacher read out loud to the students from a book, which the students did not have, from her own classroom library. *Come All You Brave Soldiers*, by Clinton Cox (New York: Scholastic Press, 1999), is ostensibly the tale of the five thousand black soldiers in the Continental Army whose stories have been largely neglected in historical accounts of the Revolutionary War. The book, published by Scholastic, is categorized as juvenile literature. Nevertheless, it is not a simple text. It weaves primary source quotations throughout, and provides a serious account of the racial and economic circumstances and dynamics that were important aspects of the Revolutionary War, and the colonial era, in general.
33. Seixas, "Schweigen! Die Kinder!"
34. Cox, *Come All You Brave Soldiers*, 56.
35. *National Standards for History*, 66.
36. Cox, *Come All You Brave Soldiers*, 40.
37. Michelle Fine, ed., *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Joe L. Kincheloe, ed., *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Wills, "Missing in Interaction."
38. Wills, "Who Needs Multicultural Education?"
39. Levstik and Barton, *Doing History*.
40. Cox, *Come All You Brave Soldiers*, 36.

41. Courtney B. Cazden, *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001).

42. Levstik and Barton, *Doing History*.

43. *National Standards for History*, 69.

44. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 23-24.