

# Can Elementary Children Think Historically?



by

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*D*uring the past twenty years the literacy of America's elementary and secondary students in the area of history has been repeatedly questioned. Many reports suggested that students lack knowledge of the basic events of history (Booth, 1980 Downey & Levstik, 1988. Hallam, 1967. Levstik, 1986. Zaccaria, 1978). In response to these accusations researchers have examined the learning process of history and the teaching methods used to facilitate the process of historical thinking. Analysis of this literature supports the idea that students' learning can be enhanced when the method of teaching is developmentally appropriate, uses established schemata, expands the knowledge base, and uses critical thinking skills to make connections between this knowledge base and new information.

After two years of guiding fifth grade students with their understanding of American history, it became evident to the author that most students enter fifth grade with limited knowledge concerning the time line and story line of this country's history. While many have heard of the major wars, have some idea about the Declaration of Independence, and connect the slavery issue to the Civil War, often these ideas are inaccurate.

Using the conventional textbook method of teaching from the beginning of time and progressing to the present was like trying to assemble a bicycle or putting a puzzle together without seeing the whole picture. Basically I did not feel that I was using the most appropriate method of instruction for this developmental level. Was I enhancing their historical thinking skills and establishing the basic understanding of the major events in American history? Beane (1991) states that the typical curriculum presents an endless array of facts and skills that are unconnected, fragmented and disjointed. That they might be connected or lead toward some whole picture is a matter that must be taken on faith by young people. Beane continues to remind teachers that students can remember substantial amounts of new information only if they are able to connect it to their existing ideas or prior knowledge. We all forget information if it is not integrated into our existing schemata.

Duis (1996) discussed the use of schema theory to teach American history. This theory's underlying idea is that learners, receive incoming information, organize it around their previously developed schemata or "networks of connected ideas." Could fifth grade students develop this schemata in order to think historically?

The review of literature on this topic was inconclusive and divided. Hallam (1967) concluded that children using historical materials think at the concrete operational level at age twelve and at the formal operational level at age sixteen. He determined that students cannot think meaningfully about history until they are at the formal operational level.

Levstik and Pappas (1987) analyzed the historical thinking ability of elementary children in grades 2, 4, and 6. The data indicated that, by the second grade, students exhibit an understanding of time and are able to learn history. Levstik and Pappas surmised that the context in which history is presented, examined, and discussed may be an important factor affecting the degree to which elementary children will think historically.

While Hallam (1967) and Peel (1965) concluded that meaningful understanding of history can not take place before the formal thinking level has been attained, they did agree with Levstik and Pappas(1987) and Downey (1988) that history can be taught to young students as long as the instruction selected matches the pupil's schemata.

West's study (1981) made the point that a mature sense of time is not necessary for children to understand history. The children who used a time line schemata developed a greater grasp of time. West concluded that elementary children have a sense of time and are capable of a full and rich awareness of the past.

Walker Percy (cited in Mills, 1991) stated that history should be taught through a holistic approach. When history is presented in isolation it lacks sense and may also lack any personal meaning for the student. If history is to be used critically, then historical information should fit into some kind of total picture and have personal meaning for the student (Welton, 1990).

After reviewing the literature regarding historical thinking, a definition for historical thinking was developed, and I proceeded with a research study that builds this schemata for making the connections. For the purpose of this study, historical thinking was defined as using critical thinking skills to make connections between specific events and the time line of history (Booth, 1980). A method was designed and implemented to teach basic knowledge of American history and then to use this knowledge daily to practice historical thinking skills. Could this method increase the students' knowledge of American history

and improve their ability to think historically? Would this method be more effective than traditional teaching methods? To determine this effectiveness the experimental group was taught using a method which supplemented the regular American history curriculum. The control group was taught the regular curriculum using the traditional methods of instruction. After nine months the students' abilities to recall factual content and to use historical thinking skills were assessed. The same assessment instruments were administered to both groups. These assessments were analyzed which indicated significant positive results.

The method called the Time-Line Technique, was designed to encourage historical thinking. It involved the use of activities that promoted a holistic view of historical events by using a narrative form for presentation. A time line was used as the format for instruction. This technique took about 10 minutes daily and did not replace the regular curriculum, but rather enhanced it. It is described below.

### **Time Line Technique**

#### **Procedure for Major Events Time Line - (The Big Picture)**

The Major Events Time Line was first taught to the students in a daily repetitive format. Ten major events were described to the students in a story line approach. Major time periods were defined: Prehistory, Exploration Period, Colonial Period, and Westward Movement. Students begin to memorize these events in a story line format. Keep the children involved and participating by drawing the time line on the overhead or the blackboard. Small groups can work together to review and learn the ten major events.

#### **Major Events for the Time Line**

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|--------------------|---|
| <u>10,000 B.C.</u> | First human beings were entering North America across the land bridge |
| <u>1000</u>        | The Vikings visited North America from Norway.                        |
| <u>1492</u>        | Columbus arrived for the first time.                                  |

- 1607 Jamestown was the first permanent settlement by the English.
- 1620 The Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth.
- 1776 The Declaration of Independence was written.
- 1787 The US Constitution was ratified.
- 1803 Westward movement began with the Lewis and Clark Expedition.
- 1812 The War of 1812 was another war between the US and Great Britain.
- 1861 The Civil War began. This war ended in 1865.

### **Procedure for Presenting the Daily Event**

The daily events are presented after the major events have been reviewed. A variety of methods for presenting the daily event must be used so as to keep interest high.

1. The first ten minutes of each class, an event of more or less historical significance is presented to students on the board or overhead. The year the event occurred or other significant details are purposely left out by the teacher. For example, on September 12, the teacher starts the class period by writing the following on the board and presenting it as a problem about which to develop inferences, raise questions and draw tentative conclusions:

September 12, \_\_\_\_\_ Congress passes the Fugitive Slave Act.

2. Students look for clue words that will help them focus in on an appropriate placement of this event on the Major Events Time Line. They may raise questions that the class can discuss.

Clue word may be "Congress". Because the event mentions Congress, it had to occur after 1787 when the Constitution was ratified.

Clue word may be "Slave" and the reason could be that this is probably near the Civil War time because it deals with the slavery issue.

Therefore, this event probably took place between 1787 and 1861.

3. The actual date (1850) can be supplied by the teacher or found in the encyclopedia by a student. Emphasis is placed upon the quality of students thinking and problem solving skills rather than absolute accuracy of their inferences.

After students understood the time line and ten major events they began to use thinking skills to determine when the daily event might possibly have happened. They also tried to justify why they chose that date. They looked for clue words in the daily event to help them make connections to their prior knowledge of history. No one was expected to know the exact year so risk taking was encouraged and positively reinforced.

The use of a time line approach taught in a narrative form can be comprehended by fifth grade children. The holistic approach enables facts to be assimilated rather than quickly forgotten when taught in isolation. Daily use of this time line technique of teaching American history makes it a regular skill which the students exercise. They developed the schemata into which they assimilated new information as it came to them daily throughout the year. They were excited about the story of their country.

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