History Through a Child’s Eye:  
Pre-service Teachers Making Sense of Children’s Understandings

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A team of five researchers set out to document pre-service teachers’ experiences interviewing elementary-aged children about social studies topics. Nearly 200 pre-service teachers across three universities participated in this longitudinal study. Collected data include: course readings, syllabi, and pre-service teachers’ *History Through a Child’s Eye* essays. Themes from the data include: pre-service teachers’ understanding of multiple perspectives, integration of digital primary sources, and development of historical evidences based upon evidences.

*Keywords*: teacher education, elementary methods, elementary social studies, social studies, teaching history, young learners

**Introduction**

*I asked a pre-service student if our country had a king. She responded, “Sure, Martin Luther King. We got out of school last week for his birthday.”*

Recognizing the importance of developing pre-service teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1987) and preparing educators who are culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 2001), we traditionally assign our elementary education students the *History Through a Child’s Eye* (Appendix A) assignment. The premise of the assignment is, in order to plan and implement instruction in the elementary social studies classroom, teachers must know what their students know in order to activate their prior knowledge.

After requiring this class assignment in our elementary social studies methods course for over 13 years, we were interested in systematically studying the qualitative themes relative to pre-service teachers’ understanding of student learning. We sensed the pre-service teachers not only were developing a sense of cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2000), but they also were acquiring their own PCK. The students’ responses to the assignment often revealed a new found appreciation of cultural understanding and the importance of connecting social studies content with students’ backgrounds. We, however, had no data to support the effectiveness of using the interview questions to support pre-service teacher development in these ways. We felt an analysis of their findings and reflections would provide us a window into their emerging PCK.

To conduct this study, we immersed ourselves in the relevant literature and analyzed a large set of qualitative data over time. Our study demonstrated the *History Through a Child’s Eye* assignment provided an effective means to support the development of pre-service teachers, especially their awareness of culturally relevant teaching strategies. Evidence of this included
the pre-service teachers’ descriptions of children’s funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992), reflections on teaching history for social justice (e.g., Tyson, 2006), plans for developing inquiry based lessons, and new strategies for identifying instructional methods to build on students’ prior knowledge.

**Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks**

Numerous empirical studies demonstrate children have the capacity to engage in historical thinking (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Barton, 1997; Barton & Levstik, 1996; Brophy & VanSledright, 2002; VanSledright, 2002). This is especially the case when “they are provided with opportunities to find ‘a way into’ the context and content of history through strategies that invited students to ‘build bridges’ from their personal realm of experiences to those of people who lived in another time” (Dulberg, 2005, p. 519). Such strategies include the use of: historical fiction (Levstik & Pappas, 1987), age appropriate primary sources (VanSeldright, 2002; Wyman, 2005), and historical photographs (Barton, 2001; Foster, Hoge, & Rosch, 1999). These strategies effectively activate student prior knowledge and provide an opportunity to build new understandings.

The research on children’s historical thinking largely supports the notion that students construct new knowledge through social interaction and their own experiential learning (Sunal & Haas, 2002). This conception of teaching and learning is based on Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism and Jean Piaget’s (1954) theory of development. According to Nancy Dulberg (2005):

> In the constructivist approach, knowledge results from an interaction between the individual and his or her social, cultural, and physical world....In the view taken here, the learner’s activity is central in knowledge acquisition; knowledge is individually, culturally, and socially constructed. (p. 509)

In other words, learning is dependent on both: the child’s prior knowledge and experiences, and the opportunities given to actively engage in learning tasks. According to John Bransford, Ann Brown, and Rodney Cocking (2000):

> There is a good deal of evidence that learning is enhanced when teachers pay attention to the knowledge and beliefs that learners bring to a learning task, use this knowledge as a starting point for new instruction, and monitor students’ changing conceptions as instruction proceeds. (p. 11)

The combination of prior experience and active engagement leads the child to develop new conceptual understandings.

The rich resources bilingual students bring with them into the classroom as “funds of knowledge” Moll (1992, p. 2). His identification of this concept was “influenced in great part by Vygotsky’s (1978) and Luria’s (1981) formulation of how social practices and the use of cultural artifacts mediate thinking.” Rather than only privilege the knowledge and experiences associated with the dominant culture, a funds of knowledge framework builds on a variety of student experiences. This framework takes into account children’s lived experiences and family life and uses these experiences as links to building new understandings.

According to Cynthia Szymanski Sunal and Mary Elizabeth Haas (2002), “Every student brings into the classroom unique personal experiences, different perspectives on the world, and different ideas about how to act in social situations” (p. 5). Acknowledging a student’s family and community life as powerful resources for educational change and improvement (Moll,

- Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively... It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly. (p. 106)

When Stuart Foster, John Hoge, and Richard Rosch (1999) studied student responses to historical photographs, for example, they found the African American student participants “tended to have a richer knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement and the slavery era of United States history compared to their European-American heritage classmates” (p. 205). They attributed these differences to “the simple operation of self-identity and self-interest” (p. 205). Culturally relevant pedagogy would leverage student interests and prior knowledge to help students develop a deeper knowledge about history.

Beyond just incorporating personally meaningful, culturally relevant pedagogy engages students in “help[ing] the individual critique and change the social environment” (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 202). An example of this is provided in Cynthia Tyson (2002) as she integrated children’s literature into a social studies classroom to “provide a framework for helping students develop a sense of what social action means to them and others and to begin to think about how to make improvements in their lives and urban communities” (p. 45).

The notion of Lee Shulman’s (1987) pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) also emphasized the context of teaching (Ladson Billings, 2001). She argued factors including the ethnic and economic backgrounds of students, “influence the content or knowledge, they influence the instruction, and they influence the way that teachers think about how to teach particular content” (p. 203).

The complex set of expertise essential to teachers was described in Shulman (1987) as pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). The expertise considered to be PCK refers to teachers not only having a deep understanding of the disciplines they teach but also being able to make the core concepts of the disciplines accessible to learners. According to Shulman, content knowledge alone will not translate into good teaching; rather, teachers must understand the “processes of learning” (p. 19). Within the field of elementary social studies education, this means pre-service teachers must develop an understanding of how to guide students through developing an understanding of social studies by activating their prior knowledge and guiding them through active learning experiences.

There has been much research to debunk the notion of elementary students as too young developmentally to engage in historical thinking (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Foster, Hoge, & Rosch, 1999; Levstik & Barton, 1997; VanSledright, 2002). This is supported by Bruce VanSledright (2004), who concedes: “The younger the students, the more likely they will be to conclude that the past is either given or inaccessible or both” (p.230); however,
“As students engage in source work (assuming they receive such opportunities), these former conclusions give way to the idea that we learn about the past via stories told about it and that these stories are stabilized by the information available” (p. 230). The research literature clearly argues teachers must provide authentic opportunities for students to engage in historical thinking, especially source work, while also providing scaffolds to support student success. These experiences must be consistent across the grade levels, rather than episodic.

Building on student prior knowledge and providing opportunities for active learning in the social studies classroom can be a complex endeavor for pre-service teachers. First, these teachers may have their own misconceptions or immature notions of historical thinking. According to Van Sledright and Peter Aftlerbach (2000) the analysis of primary sources and multiple perspectives on the past is a difficult intellectual activity for pre-service elementary teachers. These skills often are not taught in social studies methods courses (Sexias, 1998). Second, pre-service teachers may not understand their elementary students often have complex preconceptions about the past (Barton & Levstik, 1996) and are unsure of ways to activate this prior knowledge in the classroom (Wineburg &Wilson, 1988). According to Chauncey Monte-Sano (2009) novice history teachers must develop their knowledge of subject, the ability to translate understanding into action, and the disposition to reflect on students and personal beliefs.

The *History through a Child’s Eye* assignment requires pre-service teachers to begin instruction, not based on their own assumptions, but through an exploration of student experiences and prior conceptions. It emphasizes the primacy of the student’s experience for successful instruction and encourages teachers to explore intersections between language and culture and student funds of knowledge.

Reflection is key to developing and improving pre-service teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge. According to Susan Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1994), “…what distinguishes more productive from less productive teachers may not be mastery of a knowledge base, but rather standing in a different relationship to one’s own knowledge, to one’s students as knowers, and to knowledge generation in the field” (p. 31). When teachers study their students they can redefine their professional knowledge (Clandinin & Connolly, 1995). This alludes to the work of John Dewey (1933) who emphasized the process or method of inquiry, which he insisted, must become central to learning for teachers and their students.

The *History through a Child’s Eye* assignment connects the inter-related theoretical frameworks of PCK, historical thinking, and teacher reflection. The assignment re-positions the pre-service teacher as a student of her students. By asking questions about the prior conceptions students espouse, the pre-service teacher can develop new understandings about historical thinking and reflect on strategies to best impact student learning. In the process of reflection in action, teacher pedagogical content knowledge evolves.

**Methods and Data Sources**

The intent of this research investigation was to enlighten our understanding of how the *History Through a Child’s Eye* assignment informed pre-service teachers’ development. Specifically, we sought to better understand the manner in which the assignment informed their emergent PCK on children’s historical thinking. The questions guiding this investigation were:

1. How do pre-service teachers interpret elementary students’ responses to the *History through a Child’s Eye* interview questions?
2. What instructional implications do the pre-service teachers identify as a result of conducting the interview protocols with elementary-aged children?

The History Through a Child’s Eye assignment (see Appendix A) has two main components. The first component involves the pre-service teachers interviewing 2-4 children from grades Kindergarten-5. The interview questions are the result of initial work done by social studies teacher educators in the late 1990s (M. Berson, personal communication, May 23, 2013). The second component requires the pre-service teachers to summarize and to synthesize the results of their interviews in an essay. Students are to develop conclusions based on the interviews and relate their findings to course readings and discussions.

We used the assignment for over 13 years in our own elementary social studies methods courses. Data for this specific study were collected over five consecutive years. The research questions emerged as we saw patterns in our students’ development over the years. We sought to conduct an analysis of the students’ work and ground it in the literature. To address our research questions, we collected data across three universities over a five-year time period. One hundred and ninety-one pre-service teachers participated in this study. The below table illustrate how the participating pre-service teachers were distributed across the three institutions. The students at all three universities were undergraduates in an elementary teacher preparation program. They were also all working in a field-based practicum experience two days per week for the entire semester in which they were enrolled in elementary social studies methods.

Table 1
Participants

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>TOTAL</td>
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The elementary social studies methods courses were very similar across the three institutions. Each course sought to engage students in the study of how children learn basic social concepts and to help pre-service teachers plan social studies lessons. Some course objectives were to help pre-service teachers learn theories relevant to teaching in culturally diverse settings and to use these theories to create curriculum materials that affirm diversity. Other objectives included teaching pre-service teachers to create an inclusive classroom that welcomes children from all cultural backgrounds and how to plan lessons that engage students in active social studies learning.

The required textbook, at University A, was Seeing the Whole Through Social Studies (Lindquist, 2002). Students read selected chapters from Levstik & Barton’s (2005) Doing History. The readings and coursework at University B and University C were Doing History (Levstik & Barton, 2005), 50 Social Studies Strategies for K-8 Classrooms (Obenchain &
Morris, 2003) and Social Studies on the Internet (Berson, Cruz, Duplass & Johnston, 2007). In addition to the required readings, assignments for pre-service teachers at all three institutions included: creating a web-based social studies activity, completing the History Through a Child’s Eye assignment. For the final assignment, students were given the option to complete either an assignment of developing a set of literature for use in elementary social studies, a digital timeline, or an artifact bag. Themes running through all of the readings and assignments across these methods courses included understanding multiple perspectives, integrating digital primary sources, and helping elementary students develop historical conclusions based upon evidence.

Within each of the elementary social studies methods courses, pre-service teachers were given the assignment to interview 2-4 children from grades Kindergarten-5. The pre-service teachers conducted over 440 individual interviews throughout the duration of the study. In the assignment, pre-service teachers asked elementary aged students a series of questions related to the social studies. In part one, the pre-service teacher showed the student a series of five pictures from different historical time periods. The child was asked to place the pictures in chronological order. For each image, the child was prompted to explain his or her reasoning on the placement of the photos and to reflect on the depicted event. In part two, the child was asked a series of questions about governance, historical people, economics, and geography. The full list of suggested interview questions is located in Appendix A. Sample questions included:

- “What do you think the president does when he goes to work?”
- “Who do you think are the most famous people in history? What can you tell me about him or her?”
- “When you buy something in a store, who decides how much the price is?”
- “Have you ever been to a building called a bank? What is it for?”
- “What city do you live in? What are the names of some other cities?”

After completing the interviews with the children, the pre-service teachers were asked to synthesize their findings in an essay explaining the instructional implications. The reflection was to include instructional implications for the teaching and learning of elementary social studies.

The data collected for this study included the 191 essays written by each pre-service teacher and focus group transcriptions. We used qualitative methods to: analyze the data (Patton, 1987), develop coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), and ultimately trace themes across the teachers’ projects. A team of five researchers analyzed the pre-service teachers’ essays and developed coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Examples of coding categories included: “teaching strategies,” “activating prior knowledge,” “student inquiry,” “doing history,” “social justice,” and “funds of knowledge.” These categories were compared across the study using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967). Based on our initial analysis, we formed temporary hypotheses (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which we used to develop a series of focus group interview questions. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and a second round of analysis led us to refine our initial hypotheses and to draw conclusions about the pre-service teachers’ experiences. The research team then conducted a frequency count of the instructional strategies mentioned by the pre-service teachers.

**Findings**

Four dominant themes emerged from the data analysis:

1. The pre-service teachers recognized the importance of understanding students’ funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 2001).
2. The pre-service teachers noted the importance of teaching social studies through a social justice lens so that the marginalized voices are heard throughout the teaching of social studies content.

3. The pre-service teachers noted the importance of developing inquiry-based lessons to teach social studies content. This is supported in Barton and Levstik (2004) as they thoughtfully indicate, “inquiry may reach its full potential only when students engage in the entire process—using evidence to reach conclusions about meaningful questions (p.197).

4. The pre-service teachers identified a number of instructional methods that built on students’ prior experiences and prior knowledge.

The first two themes summarize the pre-service teachers’ reflections on the importance of understanding students’ perspectives and teaching in a way that celebrates traditionally marginalized funds of knowledge and individual voices. At the same time, the latter two themes summarize the instructional implications (content and strategies) the pre-service teachers gleaned from their interviews. They felt it was important to provide opportunities for students to engage in inquiry-based learning and to activate student prior knowledge. The discussion below will present the data and instructional implications for each of the four themes.

Funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 2001) is “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Nearly 98% of the pre-service teachers addressed issues raised in the interviews and elementary student understandings in terms of funds of knowledge (including life experiences, funds of knowledge, family backgrounds, etc.). PST 005 summarized:

Students will not have the same background and experiences in their personal lives or histories, which may or may not have enabled them to connect to the social studies concepts previously taught….I became aware of the importance of knowledge and skills that the students brought with them.

In analyzing the elementary student responses, for example, PST 004 wrote, “The students had exceptional understanding of banks and loans due to the fact that all three came from families that had just built new houses in the last year”. Whereas another pre-service teacher reported elementary students “…have frequently visited banks (although one child believes that banks are where you can go to get a sucker if dad says it is ok!)”. PST 232 noted the students often reported misinformation and had little knowledge base related to the social studies curriculum. She noted that the students’:

misinterpretation and disillusionment are enhanced due to egocentrism which results in a lack of understanding of the world outside of a child’s own, cognitive dissonance in which a child is presented with a differing view from her own and is forced to find a way to rectify the inaccuracies of her experiences world...

As the pre-service teachers reflected on their students’ conceptions and misconceptions, they repeatedly returned to the importance of teachers building on students’ prior knowledge. For instance, PST 001 wrote:

It is also important for the teacher to understand what their students already know so that you can build on their prior knowledge. Understanding history through the child’s eye is an essential skill for teachers to have, and once teachers start to understand their students’
thinking they can use that information to guide their instruction….It is very important for teachers to understand what knowledge students bring into the classroom.

The pre-service teachers’ contemplations of students’ funds of knowledge included discussions related to the influence of parent perspective on student bias. The pre-service teachers began to understand students’ prior knowledge was connected to students’ home lives and cultures. PST 022 reported “…often a student’s exposure comes from their families. One of the students exclaimed, ‘That is what my Dad likes to say’. This told me her information was coming from her father who was being expressive about his opinions.” While PST 009 reported, “…However, they got confused as to who the president was. Girl One is Mormon and she told me the president was Gordon B. Hinckley, (the prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). Here, the pre-service teachers confronted and perhaps began to better understand that, in assessing students’ conceptions, it is very important for teachers to probe for the context in which student knowledge has been created.

The pre-service teachers identified instructional strategies to help students make connections from what they know to the new information. Pre-service teachers noted the importance to understanding what students know before starting a unit. They identified activities such as brainstorming, charts that list what students know, what they want to know, and what they have learned, pre-tests, and anticipation guides. They went beyond just the context knowledge to noting the importance of understanding a student’s cultural background.

Reflecting on the student interviews, pre-service teachers identified the critical importance of understanding a child’s mesosystem. Referring back to course readings, one pre-service teacher explained: “Mesosystems such as family, religious setting, and peer group all affect how students perceive topics discussed in the classroom. I know even students from the same community will arrive in the classroom with different stores of knowledge” (PST 200).

PST 241 reflected:

While I realize that many factors influence the thinking of children, the mesosystems existing outside of school greatly influence how students view history in a factual context. Mesosystems such as family, religious setting, and peer group all have as much influence as the classroom. Parents often remain the greatest influence in the life of a child, as shown by the bias of the 3rd grade student when questioned about the President of the United States. He knew George W. Bush was the current president and described him as lazy, using tax money for no reason but to drill holes in the Antarctic. The other two siblings I interviewed knew a great deal about Martin Luther King, Jr. and his work...The stores of knowledge these students bring to the class relate to their personal lives.

It was an important awakening for many of the pre-service teachers we studied to realize just how complex and important student prior knowledge was to understanding their current understandings and misconceptions about social studies topics. Interestingly many of the pre-service teachers communicated their own political bias through their desire to complexify the topics they discussed in their reflection papers.

The History through a Child’s Eye assignment provided students the opportunity to talk with children and better understand how their funds of knowledge impacted what they know and how they learn. PST 241 summarized, “Prior funds of knowledge are not only important for the sake of a teacher knowing their students, but it is necessary for efficiently providing students with new information”.
Approximately 99% of the students addressed issues of social justice. In particular, the pre-service teachers commented on the role gender played in young children’s understanding of the past. Nearly all (98%) of the pre-service teachers noted, and were surprised that the elementary students did not name a woman when asked to name a famous person in history. When asked, “Who do you think is the most important woman you’ve ever heard of?” many students responded “my Mom”. Aside from entertainers, the only other women identified consistently were Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks (although not always by name). A pre-service teacher commented “...the teacher should aspire to empower her students by intentionally making them aware of the underrepresented voices of females and other minorities so that students will learn how to ask critical questions while learning the curriculum material”. PST 037 captured the wonderment of most:

My second conclusion really surprised me. These students knew very, very little about women in history. In fact, when I asked them to name a famous woman in history, they only named one, Rosa Parks. I asked them if they could name any others and they drew blanks. After my interviews, I went back, looked through their social studies books, and talked with the teacher. What I found confirmed why they knew so little about women in history. I couldn’t find but maybe one or two women mentioned in their social studies books and the teacher said that they often don’t cover many women in class because the book doesn’t cover women. This SHOCKED me. This issue is one that seriously needs to be addressed. (emphasis in original)

The History through the Child’s Eye assignment seems to have awakened a sense of advocacy on the part of the pre-service teachers with whom we worked. They sought out the root of the gaps in student knowledge and wanted to bring about changes. Similarly, Levstik and Barton (2005) argued:

…disciplined, reflective inquiry on conflicts and persistent issues in history gives students practice as the social studies standards suggest in discussing the arguments and evidence that surround such dilemmas, but it is also more likely to help students see themselves as having agency, the power to act (p. 139).

Many of the pre-service teachers seemed to embody this notion of empowerment. Moved to respond to students’ missing pieces of history, another pre-service wrote:

We must start with a more embracing curriculum, making sure to include a wide variety of individuals for students to see that it wasn’t just men that did everything in history. I have found several great websites on women in history, but they still don’t include women from many groups like Latinas, but it’s a step in the right direction.

Talking with the children exposed the pre-service teachers to the phenomenon that the marginalized voices are often left out of the elementary social studies curriculum. Through the voices of the children, the pre-service teachers noted the stories of: women, people of color, immigrants, Native Americans, and other marginalized people are not part of the social studies curriculum in many classrooms. One pre-service teacher reflected:

I was saddened, but not surprised by the fact that they [elementary students] couldn’t place or even identify Cesar Chavez and/or Dolores Huerta in history. All of them could identify African American leaders such as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, but not one could identify Cesar Chavez or Dolores Huerta, a disturbing fact….They did so
much, but it’s not considered as important as the contributions made by other minority groups.

Reflecting on this phenomenon of the marginalized voices being left out of the curriculum, the pre-service teachers began to identify instructional strategies they could address this issue in their classroom. One pre-service teacher noted:

For example, second graders could write a letter as if they were an African-American soldier during World War II or read a diary entry written by a female Suffragette. As stated in *The Sociocultural Context for Studying History*, such teaching strategies are vital to a socially just classroom because students who do not see themselves as members of groups who had agency in the past or power in the present, who are invisible in history, lack viable models for the future.

While another reflected:

A final classroom implication for teachers to consider is to create lesson plans that directly compare the differences and similarities among cultures as another way to make students aware of life outside of their own. Tarry Lindquist, author of *Seeing the Whole through Social Studies*, asserts that social studies “engages the learner personally in recognizing and valuing differences and similarities [because] it is inclusive, putting what is familiar to students into historical geographical, and cultural perspectives” (Lindquist, 2002, p. 23).

Though the pre-service teachers suggested numerous student-centered activities, two overarching instructional implications were identified by 100% of them: engaging students in inquiry-based instruction and activating prior knowledge. All pre-service teachers indicated understanding the social studies thinking of elementary students was fundamental to designing instruction and building on these understandings included modeling the inquiry process. One pre-service teacher captured the sentiment of many, “This made me realize that as a teacher, it is important for teachers to model how to draw conclusions from evidence” (PST 203). “As a teacher, I would emphasize that no one can know everything that occurred in the past because we were not there to experience the events therefore students, like historians, should always ask questions” (PST 204).

The pre-service teachers often noted the students’ responses most likely reflected the recent topics of study in the elementary social studies curriculum. When the pre-service teachers conducted the student interviews in January, for example, 98% of the children mentioned Martin Luther King in some capacity. One pre-service teacher commented:

One student thought we had a king! She said our king was Martin Luther King. The other students all mentioned Martin Luther King. I’m guessing that’s because Martin Luther King’s birthday was last week and the teacher did a lesson on him.

“Inquiry is the process of asking meaningful questions, finding information, drawing conclusions, and reflecting on solutions” (Levstik & Barton, 2005, p.19). As they reflected on their interviews with students, 96% of the pre-service teachers reported they planned to use teaching strategies that would encourage elementary students to engage in inquiry. These included instructional strategies such as: artifact bags, WebQuests, elementary student developed timelines, primary sources for inquiry and analysis, and literature collections that addressed events from multiple perspectives. The stated purpose of integrating these activities was to
facilitate elementary students’ social studies inquiries and thinking. One pre-service teacher reported:

In designing curriculum for 5th grade students about women in history using primary and secondary sources, I would have students read documents from the time period, use books, and journals in order for students to build their own learning....I would also use literature collections of fiction and non-fiction books and websites that house speeches, diaries, journals and government documents to support their inquiries. The next strategy I would use is artifact bags. ‘Artifacts give students access to moments of daily life from the past, thereby revealing social history’ (Obenchain & Morris, 28). Since my students are in fifth grade, they are developmentally ready to analyze sequence to establish the purpose of these artifacts while sorting them chronologically. I would find artifacts from the 1920s that relate to women’s suffrage and the right to vote (i.e. copy of a ballot, pictures, “I voted” pin, Susan B. Anthony dollar coin). The students would rummage through the bags and write down two observations for each item and what they think the significance of that item is. Finally, using all of this information, the students will make a front page of a newspaper. This allows students to focus on social and cultural history along with political and economic history.” (PST 054)

The pre-service teachers clearly noted the importance of having elementary students authentically engage in questions and inquiries meaningful to the Kindergarten-6 students. In designing an artifact bag; pre-service teachers purposefully chose a topic the students demonstrated little knowledge; however, the content of the bags connected to students’ existing interests and experience. Nearly 40% of pre-service teachers engaged students in inquiry by having elementary students bring in personal artifacts that might tell others about their lives. “I thought I could also have students make their own artifact bag that represented how girls live today; toys, clothes, non-perishable food, photos, and such....as if they were sharing their lives with someone who didn’t know them” (PST 100).

The use of technology was addressed by 88% of the pre-service teachers in relation to inquiry. Most often, technology use was found through the development of or use of extant inquiry-based WebQuests (45%), the use of digital primary and secondary sources by elementary students (75%), the use of websites for exploration and information gathering by students (80%), and the development of technology-based products such as PowerPoint slide shows or digital timelines (using images and text) (75%).

In order to expose these students to women in history, I could do many things. One of my favorites that I found was a WebQuest at Education World® on the Internet. (Education World, 2007) What I liked about this WebQuest is that I can adapt it to fit whatever category of women I would like the students to study...This project would give the students a lot of exposure to many different women, as at the end of their research, they would present what they found to the class. It also ties technology into the mix. In the article, “Guidelines to using Technology to Prepare Social Studies Teachers,” the authors stated, “Technology opens the door to learning social studies skill and content in ways impossible in the traditional classroom” (Mason, C., et al., 2000, p. 107). I completely agree with this statement. It would be a lot more difficult to expose students to famous women in history without the use of the Internet. (PST 059).
The pre-service teachers were careful to design instruction and to use technology in ways they considered fun and informative for Kindergarten-6 students. First, to introduce them to banking I would have them go to the hands-on-banking website. This is an interactive and fun site that is much like a virtual fieldtrip. It gives students a great tutorial on banking. The best part is you can pick the grade level so that it is not too easy or too hard. Students would need to spend about a week working with this site because there is a ton of information, but it is definitely worthwhile.

Several pre-service teachers noted the importance of using technology to fact check topics in their social studies book. One explained:

This would help these third graders make a connection to their own lives by making it their own discovery and development of their own opinions based on research. I think the key is for these girls would be to actually experience history rather than read about it...According to Levstik and Barton (2001), ‘The study of history must begin with the concerns and interests of the students and must help them find answers to questions that grow out of those concerns and interests’ (p.14).

The use of literature-based inquiry, additionally, was a suggested instructional strategy by 88% of the pre-service teachers. These included: book clubs, student-developed reader’s theater, and literature sets. PST 092 wrote,

...quality children’s literature integrates naturally with social studies’ (Obenchain & Morris, 2007, p.104). Each literature set would focus on a topic of interest to the students and address the topic from various perspectives. This would build their inquiry skills. Just because something is in a book doesn’t mean it is true. Students need to learn this.

The pre-service teachers framed their suggested instructional strategies within student-centered inquiries. In addition to those above activities such as mini-societies, museum exhibits, traveling ambassadors, or interactive bulletin boards were all focused on engaging elementary students as inquirers. “Allowing students to interact in a ‘mini-society’ in the way that they might in the real world by taking on different roles would allow them to understand the functions that occur simply beyond what they see” (PST 206).

The second dominant instructional strategy was activating students’ prior knowledge. Every one of the pre-service teachers indicated activating elementary students’ prior knowledge and understandings was pivotal in designing instruction. PST 105 wrote:

I never realized how a simple interview with a few students can give you so much insight into what your students know and need. Had I never taken the time to talk to [my students], I would never have any ideas about how to help them in social studies. I would not have seen what they already know and what misconceptions and understandings they have.

The assignment provided an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to systematically study their students and their misconceptions. According to PST 203, “I am further aware of the role that teachers play in scaffolding their students’ prior knowledge and enhancing their general schemes into specific ones.” The idea that teachers must build on student prior knowledge and connect it to new learning was mentioned repeatedly. PST 016 wrote:

‘For greater understanding, students need to be able to connect new learning experiences to prior knowledge’ (Levstik & Barton, 2005, p. 23). This will be more easily accomplished when students are actively engaged in learning activities. Based on this
philosophy, I would use what the students do know about history to guide my instructional decisions for teaching Social Studies content. In order to activate prior knowledge, many of the pre-service teachers reported that they planned to use graphic organizers to introduce a new topic to students. One explained:

Along with the KWL chart I would lead a discussion in order to see what the students know and what they do not know. It is very important to activate and develop students’ prior knowledge because it helps them develop schemas which they will need in order to learn and fully understand the history that is being taught. This type of learning helps develop critical thinking skills, which are useful for any subject. (PST 070)

Similarly, PST 206 wrote:

Using such practical applications as KWL’s, but being sure to make the K something that will access their prior knowledge and not simply ask them about what they know about the new information I am going to teach them. I also need to think of more creative ways to do this: journal entries, group discussions, etc…. [B]y creating ways to express what they know in forms other than right and wrong will allow students to further their thinking.

In addition to using prior knowledge in a general sense, the pre-service teachers purposefully built upon elementary students’ prior knowledge when addressing specific content and strategies for teaching that content. PST 088 reported:

A “visual timeline” is a great idea for any classroom, ‘or a timeline to be effective, it must build on students’ prior knowledge’ (Levstik and Barton, 2005, p. 98). We would make a timeline including immigration dates from their families on one of the walls in the classroom that would be made up of the last one hundred years. Then we would put pictures up for the different dates and give students the opportunity to also bring in their own pictures and artifacts for the timeline. This strategy would be a great way for my students to learn how their families are connected with historical migration patterns. This would give the students a chance to explore and collect data of when their families migrated to the U.S and how that particular time in history was. The information that the students would gather would be all from first source account. This would give the students the understanding that they as well as their family members play a role in history.

In reference to building upon prior knowledge to teach geography, a content area that few elementary students seemed to grasp, a pre-service teacher wrote:

When teaching geography, elementary school teachers should attempt to create meaningful lessons that ‘make natural use of old information to help students understand new information through examples or analogies’ (Woolfolk, 2007, p. 269). Students are much more inclined to remember the differences between cities, countries, and continents if they learn this material in a manner that relates to their lives. For example, if I were teaching about the differences between cities, states, and countries, I would probably use a virtual field trip to help give the students some meaningful context from which to draw conclusions. Google Earth would be a great resource for this. The kids could see everything from Washington, D.C. right down to their own front yard. Just showing the students places on a map doesn’t give them any sort of reference to differentiate between the denominations. But using Google Earth would give them a
chance to actually see landmarks they can identify with and model the movement from city to state to country. (PST 207)

Active learning is very important in a content area like social studies where teachers ‘rely mainly on textbooks as the primary source for textual information’ (Kragler, Walker, & Martin, 2005). When social studies relies only on textbooks ‘children don’t connect what’s going on in the classroom with their minds, their hands and their hearts, then it seems...that not much learning is going to occur’. Thus, to grasp concepts such as: city/town, state, and etc. Kids really need to get out there and explore what is around them before they can get the bigger picture” (PST 208).

Although a plethora of activities were suggested to help elementary students learn social studies, the focus for the pre-service teachers was clear: to help young students engage in inquiry and to build upon prior knowledge. The findings indicate, however, that the pre-service teachers became keenly aware of the elementary students’ prior knowledge as a result of History through a Child’s Eye and used this data to inform their ‘teacher’ understandings rather than to develop curriculum and instruction that built upon elementary students’ prior knowledge.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, we have required this assignment of our pre-service elementary education students for over 13 years. We were working under the assumption that the assignment was a catalyst for pre-service teachers’ development in better understanding teaching and learning elementary social studies. Our analysis of the pre-service teachers’ responses to the History Through a Child’s Eye assignment indicates that it successfully prompted these pre-service teachers to reflect on their students in a systematic and valuable manner. It is noteworthy that, for the majority of these elementary pre-service teachers, they uncovered important and sometimes surprising new information about their Kinderarten-6 students. Although they were surprised by misunderstandings and misconceptions their students held, they were able to reflect on the legitimate reasons these occurred. Armed with this new knowledge, the pre-service teachers began to seek teaching strategies to activate prior knowledge and to engage students in inquiry-based activities. One pre-service teacher reported,

Beginning to understand the historical thinking of elementary students is fundamental to developing curriculum and instruction for learners. In this class we have learned that doing history is the best way for students to learn history. This idea engages children in learning history in a real life situation (PST 093).

Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2005) suggested “basic theoretical principles” for the teaching of history including: teaching and learning must have a purpose, learning means in-depth understanding, learning through disciplined inquiry, scaffolding, and informative assessment. The evidence from this study indicates that the History through a Child’s Eye assignment provides pre-service teachers the scaffold to develop a better understanding of young students and to develop instructional implications that addressed these basic theoretical principles.

Most of the pre-service teachers with whom we worked had little to no background in the teaching of social studies and minimal content knowledge of social studies. (Several pre-service teachers indicated they did not know the answer to all of the interview questions.) As such, we often faced a difficult challenge as methods instructors to help future teachers learn to teach content in pedagogically sound ways. The History through a Child’s Eye assignment provided
the pre-service teachers with powerful evidence to confirm the validity of the methods course work; it made clear connections between theory and practice.

The exercise of talking with students proved to be a valuable learning experience for these pre-service teachers. They learned the heart of classroom instruction is the child. The assignment allowed pre-service teachers to explore the complex and multi-faceted phenomenon of teaching social studies in the elementary classroom. Pre-service teachers explored the nature of teaching a culturally relevant curriculum and inquiry-based strategies that fostered the development of social studies skills and knowledge. The assignment problematized the nature of teaching the social studies curriculum to a diverse group of students in an era of accountability, which was the intended purpose of this study.

References


Appendix A  
**History Through a Child’s Eye Assignment**

In order to plan and implement instruction, it is essential to understand what children already know. Since all instruction must build on students’ prior knowledge and experience, you must become familiar with students’ thinking. This assignment gives you the chance to do that in the area of social studies. In this assignment, you will interview at least two children. (The interview form is attached.) You should either record the interview to use in writing your essay, or work with another student who takes notes during the interview.

In the essay you will identify three main conclusions you have reached from the interviews, support each with the use of specific examples form the interviews, and explain three instructional ideas for each of these conclusions. Your conclusions must be generalizations, which identify patterns in students’ responses, NOT a description of students’ responses to every question you asked. Instructional implications must include reference to professional sources other than those assigned in class (professional readings, ERIC resources, appropriate children’s literature, web sites, computer software, etc.). Since this is an essay, it also must include introductory and concluding paragraphs that identify the essay’s main points.

**Interview Form**

In order to create a set of historical pictures for this exercise, choose five pictures (total) from any history book. Use the photocopier to make copies. (You may need to reduce some pictures). In order to make the most useful set, keep the following principles in mind:

- Choose pictures from times that look widely separated.
- Choose pictures that have more than one clue in them (fashion, technology, social roles).
- Avoid pictures that are just headshots of famous people.
- Include pictures with women and minorities.
- When arranging pictures in a sequence, begin with a very easy choice (a picture with cars or other modern technology and one without, for example).

Explain to the students that you want to find out what they know and what they are interested in. Explain that you will show them some pictures and ask them some questions about what they know. Explain that some questions might be too easy or too hard, and if there are any questions they don’t know the answer to, it’s okay just to say, "I don’t know." Ask if they have any questions before you start. If you use a recorder, have them say their names into the recorder and play it back to them.

- Show students two pictures from different times, and ask them to put the picture from the longest time ago on their left and the one that’s closest to now on the right. Ask them to explain how they know which picture is oldest. Show them each of the other pictures one at a time, and have them put each where it belongs—before the other pictures, after them, or in between. For each picture, have them explain how they knew where it goes.
- Ask: Did you think this was easy or hard to do? What things made it easy or hard?
- Ask: Which pictures do you think are the most interesting? Why?
- Pick one picture, and ask students: How do you think your life would have been different if you had been alive at this time?
- Point to each picture and ask: About when do you think this is?
● Explain that now you’re going to ask some more questions that aren’t just about the pictures. Emphasize again that some questions might be hard, and some might be easy, and that it’s okay to say, "I don’t know."

- Do we have a king in our country? (If students say "yes," ask who it is.)
- Who is the president?
- What do you think the president does when he goes to work?
- How does someone get to be president? (If students say the president is elected, ask if they know of any other people who get elected.)
- What do judges do?
- Who do you think are the most famous people in history? What can you tell me about him/her?
- Tell me something about George Washington.
- Tell me something about Martin Luther King.
- Who do you think is the most important woman you’ve ver heard of?
- When you buy something in a store, who decides how much the price is?
- How do they decide how much to charge for it?
- Where does the store get the things it sells? (If students say they buy them from somewhere else, ask, if you paid five dollars for something at the store, how much would the store have paid for it when they got it—five dollars, more than five dollars, or less than five dollars?)
- What are taxes? What are they used for? Who decides how much taxes will be?
- Have you ever been to a building called a bank? What is it for?
- What happens when you put your money in a bank?
- If you put your money in the bank and then take it back out later, do you get the same amount you put in, less than you put in, or more than you put in? Why?
- Can you borrow money from a bank? If you borrow money, when you pay it back, do you pay back the same amount you borrowed, more than you borrowed, or less than you borrowed? Why?
- What city do you live in? What are the names of some other cities?
- What state do you live in? What are the names of some other states?
- What country do you live in? Tell me the name of some other countries.
- What things are different in other parts of the world? How are they different?
- Where have you learned about other parts of the world?
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