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REFLECTING ON ELEMENTARY CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY AND SOCIAL STUDIES

AN INQUIRY PROJECT WITH BEGINNING TEACHERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE UNITED STATES

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Beginning teachers in Northern Ireland and the United States conducted structured inquiry projects in which they investigated elementary children's understanding of history and social studies. Interviews with the teachers and analysis of their written assignments indicate that these investigations challenged their beliefs about children's prior knowledge and their own instructional techniques. Teachers initially believed that inadequate cognitive development and lack of background knowledge limited children's ability to understand history and social studies; however, after taking part in these projects, they developed a new appreciation for children's prior ideas and a clearer commitment to their own role in building on that knowledge. These findings suggest that structured investigations, focused on specific disciplinary content, have the potential to encourage beginning teachers' reflection on their students' cognition and to enhance their own sense of professional responsibility.

Keywords: *history; social studies; teacher preparation; teacher reflection; action research*

A critical responsibility for teacher educators is engaging beginning teachers in reflection on children's learning, particularly with regard to their prior knowledge and the structure of their ideas in specific subjects. This can be a daunting task. Action research seems a more promising avenue for developing this kind of reflection and understanding than classroom lectures, yet beginning teachers have many things on their minds besides children's cognition, and they rarely have the knowledge or skills to develop

investigations into students' disciplinary ideas on their own. Unfortunately (and ironically), an increasing emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability may make such undertakings even less palatable: Content coverage and test preparation may seem more pressing concerns than open-ended and potentially messy investigations of children's thought processes.

However, understanding how children think is no luxury. It is a crucial component of successful teaching and a necessary prerequisite to any

gains in student achievement. In this article, we explore one way critical reflection can take place even within the prevailing culture of accountability as well as become a means for introducing beginning teachers to the challenging task of classroom-based inquiry. We do this through consideration of a small-scale, task-based intervention that required beginning elementary teachers in Northern Ireland and the United States to investigate and reflect on young children's understanding of history, geography, economics, and other aspects of social studies. Our experiences in these two settings suggests that efforts such as this have the potential to increase teachers' pedagogical knowledge in a way that honors their developing professionalism.

To plan and implement constructivist approaches to education, teachers need insight into children's thinking. Only by becoming familiar with children's cognition will they be able to design instruction that expands their students' conceptual understanding. As Ball and Cohen (1999) noted, teachers need to see instructional procedures through the eyes of their students, to become adept at listening to their ideas, and to see them as "more capable of thinking and reasoning, and less as blank slates who lack knowledge" (p. 8). Although a number of studies have addressed teachers' general beliefs about the nature of learners and learning (see, for example, Prawat, 1992, and the review in Borko & Putnam, 1995), recent work has emphasized the need for familiarity with the disciplinary features of students' thinking: Acquainting beginning teachers with the content-area thinking of children has come to be regarded as a critical component of initial teacher preparation (Borko & Putnam, 1995).

From this standpoint, changes in teachers' instructional practices depend, in part, on their engagement with "concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development" (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996, p. 203). When teachers have the chance to examine children's performance in meaningful classroom contexts, they often develop new understandings of how children learn (Falk &

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

This process of reflection typically involves three interrelated aspects of teachers' pedagogical understanding—their ideas about how students think in specific subject areas, their beliefs about instructional techniques in those subjects, and their conceptualization of the subject matter itself. A substantial body of research on each of these aspects of teacher thinking now exists in mathematics (Nelson & Hammerman, 1996), and scholarship in the language arts has long been concerned with promoting teachers' awareness of the development of student literacy and the resulting implications for instructional practice (e.g., Genishi & Dyson, 1984; Goodman, 1973; Heath, 1983; Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1990). In the field of social studies education, however, research on teachers' thinking has been limited to investigations of their understanding of the discipline of history (Bohan & Davis, 1998; Hartzler-Miller, 2001; Seixas, 1998; VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2000; Yeager & Davis, 1995), or of their ideas about instructional purposes and methods in history and social studies (Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; Evans, 1990; Fickel, 2000; Grant, 2001; Wilson & Wineburg, 1988, 1993). Largely missing have been investigations of teachers' ideas about children's ideas. Only Seixas (1994) directly addressed this topic, in a brief description of a university course assignment designed to give preservice teachers a better understanding of how secondary students located themselves with reference to history. In that assignment, teachers conducted interviews with small groups of students to assess their prior historical understanding. Seixas suggested that this experience led participants to a better under-

standing of students' epistemological assumptions about history, their ideas about progress and decline, and their perceptions of what is interesting or significant in history.

We believe Seixas's assignment points the way toward a productive avenue for engaging beginning teachers in meaningful forms of inquiry into children's disciplinary understandings. In history education, recent research provides an impressive resource for enlivening teachers' perceptions of how children make sense of historical information. Yet the idea that teacher education programs can simply transmit this body of knowledge to prospective teachers has become almost as outdated as the corresponding transmission theories of elementary and secondary schooling. Teachers' views of learning are heavily influenced by their own past experiences, and these experiences lead to a set of beliefs and expectations that can be highly resistant to change (Borko & Putnam, 1996). A developing consensus holds that effective teacher education programs (or professional development programs for experienced teachers) must engage teachers in the same kinds of reflective, inquiry-oriented learning as they are expected to implement in their own classrooms. From this perspective, teachers can no longer be seen as passive consumers of other people's ideas but must become engaged themselves in the active construction of knowledge about teaching and learning (Wells, 1993).

Such inquiry-oriented approaches to the education of teachers—particularly under the general rubric of action research—have received increasing attention, and this popularity is reflected in an outpouring of rationales for this approach (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Elliott, 1991; Goswami & Stillman, 1987), how-to manuals (Hubbard & Power, 1993; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996; Mills, 2000), and collections of the results of teacher research (Pierce & Gilles, 1993; Wells, 1993). At this relatively early stage of development, the field of action research is characterized by a wide variety of purposes, theoretical orientations, methodologies, settings, and types of reflective activity (Noffke, 1997; Rearick & Feldman, 1999). Perhaps the two clearest points of agreement

among these diverse perspectives are that action research is a desirable procedure for promoting reflection, and that it should play a role in the education of teachers (Dinkelman, 1997).

Yet in our informal conversations with educators who engage teachers in action research projects—particularly at the stage of initial preparation—we often have heard expressions of lingering frustration with the process. Despite their commitment to teacher inquiry, and their acceptance of diverse means of engaging in that inquiry, educators often report dissatisfaction with the quality of beginning teachers' questions, their plans for collecting information, and the depth of their reflection. These difficulties are hardly surprising, for these action researchers are only beginners—beginners at teaching, beginners at classroom inquiry, and, given the likelihood that they have gone through an examination-based, transmission-oriented educational system themselves, beginners at the very process of systematically asking and answering meaningful questions in any academic field. Helping them become successful teacher-researchers surely requires that we provide as much scaffolding as we expect them to provide for children in their own classrooms. This scaffolding requires a delicate balancing act that provides the structure necessary for success but avoids overdetermining the process or results of inquiry.

We suggest that one potentially effective way of promoting success for teachers engaged in classroom inquiry is to involve them in structured projects that focus on children's thought processes in specific academic disciplines. Such projects can develop the critical reflection that will serve teachers well throughout their careers and provide a platform on which they may base later, more extensive efforts at teacher research. At the same time, this kind of project has the capacity for increasing familiarity with children's discipline-specific thinking—as noted earlier, a critical component of initial preparation programs—but within a context that honors these teachers' nascent professionalism, including their developing commitment to the inquiry process. In addition, when these projects occur within university courses that

emphasize discipline-specific teaching methods, they can provide students the chance to reflect in a collaborative setting of fellow researchers and to link their findings to the broader community of scholarship—both of which are important components of meaningful action research (Wells, 1993). In this article, we reflect on our own experience with one such effort, in an attempt to illustrate some of the potential benefits of engaging beginning teachers in structured inquiry into children's thinking in a single academic field.

METHOD

To explore this issue, we conducted two separate case studies. One of these took part in Northern Ireland, the other in a large Midwestern city in the United States. The studies shared a concern with developing beginning teachers' understanding of children's thinking in history/social studies, however some differences in methodology were necessitated by the unique characteristics of the two settings (including differences in school curriculum, instructors' teaching styles, extent of participants' previous experiences, and participants' additional responsibilities). In addition, the Northern Ireland study served as a pilot for work in the United States, so the scale and design of the two studies differed somewhat. Both, however, were guided by the same basic questions:

- How will a structured inquiry project affect beginning teachers' ideas about children's cognition in history and social studies?
- How will beginning teachers themselves evaluate the usefulness of such a project?

Setting, Participants, and Sampling Procedures

We conducted this study with two sets of beginning teachers, one group in Northern Ireland and one in the United States. Those in Northern Ireland were enrolled in a specialist "Curriculum Studies: History" course as part of the 4th and final year of a B.A. program in Primary Education at one of the province's two major state-supported institutions of teacher

training. In the 1st year of their program, students participated in a course that provided an introduction to history teaching. The emphasis of that course was to establish classroom history as a form of inquiry. This was followed in the 2nd year by a course concentrating on the key ideas of change through time, causation, evidence, and differing interpretations as foundations on which to build history lessons. The 4th-year course built on previous provision to give students an in-depth understanding of the teaching and learning associated with the history curriculum in Northern Ireland. This prepared teachers, in the short term, for an 8-week teaching experience and, in the longer term, to assume responsibility for a post as history coordinator in a school. (History and geography are taught as distinct subjects in primary schools in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the United Kingdom; there is no integrated "social studies" of the kind that exists in the United States.)

The U.S. portion of the study took place as part of a graduate social studies methods course (the second on the topic) for beginning teachers at a large Midwestern university. Teachers were in the final year of a 5-year elementary teacher education program (or, for some, the 2nd year of a postbaccalaureate program), in which they worked as interns for a full year in professional development schools and took university courses in the evenings. Some were compensated "teachers of record," with complete responsibility for their classrooms for one half of each day, whereas others worked under mentor teachers who gradually transferred responsibility through a process similar to a traditional student-teaching model (although with a more extensive level of involvement in the school and a much longer period of placement). The research reported here took place during the final 10 weeks of interns' placements in the schools, so that by the beginning of the project, participants already had several months of teaching experience and had assumed complete responsibility for classroom planning and instruction during one half of each school day. Compared to their counterparts in Northern Ireland, these teachers had much more experi-

ence planning and implementing instruction but much less exposure to the nature of history (or any other single component of the social studies) as a disciplinary form of inquiry.

In the Northern Ireland study, data from classroom discussion and written assignments were collected from the 28 members of the class, and a focus group interview was conducted with a sample of four volunteers. In the U.S. study, data were collected from written assignments and pretask and posttask focus group interviews with a sample of nine volunteers. In both cases, the use of a small, self-selected sample, drawn from a convenient population, seriously limits the study's generalizability. In particular, the participants in these two studies may have been more reflective, and more favorably disposed toward course assignments, than their peers. Future research would benefit from a larger sample, drawn probabilistically from a more heterogeneous population. In the meantime, findings from our sample can at least begin to establish potential patterns that characterize teachers' responses to this kind of inquiry.

Research Design, Instruments, and Data Analysis

Each of our two research projects consisted of a single case study of the responses of a group of teachers to a structured inquiry task. In the Northern Ireland study, we took open-ended field notes on participants' discussions of children's thinking during initial class sessions, we read their responses to a structured composition assigned as part of course requirements, and we conducted semistructured focus group interviews with four participants. In the U.S. study, we conducted semistructured pretask and posttask focus group interviews with nine participants (interviewed separately in groups of four and five), and we also read structured compositions assigned as a course requirement. (Interview protocols appear in Appendix 1; course assignments are reproduced in Appendix 2). The assignment in Northern Ireland asked teachers to reach conclusions about children's thinking and to reflect on the value of the

inquiry task; in the United States, the assignment related only to children's cognition, and questions regarding the value of the task were incorporated into the focus group interviews.

Because participants in Northern Ireland had limited experience working in classrooms, we chose not to conduct pretask interviews regarding their ideas about children's thinking; discussing the topic informally in class seemed a less threatening means of exploring the topic. The disadvantage of that approach, however, was that we have only an unsystematic baseline with which to compare their posttask responses. Moreover, in Northern Ireland, our posttask interview was so general and unstructured that it generated limited data (although participants' compositions compensated for this shortcoming to some degree). In the U.S. study, we developed a more structured interview protocol, and we administered it before and after students undertook the inquiry task. As a result, we have more complete and systematic data from U.S. participants, and changes in their ideas are more clearly reflected in the findings that we discuss later. In neither setting did we use a comparison group, so we are highly cautious about attributing changes in teachers' ideas solely to this task. Future research might well employ comparison groups in an attempt to separate out the comparative impact on teachers' thinking of the inquiry task and other factors.

The reported findings from this research are the result of a process of analytic induction. Field notes, interview transcripts, and compositions were coded in an open-ended manner to identify themes and patterns in participants' responses. Some initial categories were broken down, combined, or added to during the course of coding, and the analysis included a systematic search for negative or discrepant evidence. Coded data was then further analyzed using cross-case analysis (in which we grouped the responses of participants responding to the same questions or stimuli) and constant comparison (in which we compared participants' responses across different portions of the research). Data from each of the two case studies

initially was analyzed separately, however similarities in the findings led us to combine them for the purposes of discussion in this article.

Procedures

The inquiry task was designed to guide teachers in becoming acquainted with children's ideas related to social studies content as well as in reflecting on the implications of those ideas for curriculum and instruction. As part of their course work, teachers in each setting were required to conduct interviews with two to eight students; these interviews followed an open-ended, protocolled format, and were designed to acquaint teachers with key aspects of children's thinking in history and (in the U.S. portion of the study) economics, geography, and government. During the interviews, teachers showed students a series of five or six pictures from different times in history and asked them to arrange the pictures in chronological order, to explain how they knew what order they went in, and to estimate when each picture was. (Participants in the United States were supplied with a standardized set of pictures; those in Northern Ireland created their own sets.) This kind of interview task has been used widely in academic research on children's historical thinking (Barton, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Barton & Levstik, 1996; Harnett, 1993; West, 1981), and it was chosen for this project because of its potential for revealing children's reasoning in a way that paper-and-pencil tasks were unlikely to do. In Northern Ireland, teachers also were required to select four important figures from history and to ask children what they knew about them, whereas in the United States teachers were to ask children who the most famous men and women in history they could think of were, and more specifically to ask what they knew about George Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr. In Northern Ireland, individual biography is not a significant part of the curriculum, whereas in the United States, stories of individual achievement are a mainstay of elementary history (Barton, 1997, 2001a). In both settings, we hoped that these questions would provide insight into the extent and

structure of children's knowledge of specific people in the past.

In the United States, the history portion of the task was followed by a series of questions covering other aspects of social studies; these included asking students if they knew who the president was, what the president does, and how someone becomes president; asking what city, state, and country they live in and if they could name other cities, states, and countries; asking how life differs in other countries; and asking what happens to money in banks and how prices are decided on in stores. (Because these topics either are not part of the official curriculum in Northern Ireland, or are part of other subject areas, they were not included in the task undertaken by teachers there.) As with the history portion of the task, these questions were chosen so that teachers could explore aspects of children's thinking and reasoning rather than identify gaps in their content knowledge. Even young children usually know who the president is, for example, but they have a limited understanding of the president's responsibilities within a system of government. Similarly, young children can usually name cities, states, and countries; however, they often confuse one category with another, or conflate all three. The final content of the task was based on our informal observations of how children's ideas about social studies may challenge beginning teachers' beliefs, and on previous research into children's understanding of history (Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; Levstik & Barton, 1996), economics (Berti & Bombi, 1988; Furth, 1980; Jahoda, 1984), and politics (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1969; Hess & Torney, 1967; Moore, Lare, & Wagner, 1985).

The overall structure and content of the interview was designed to highlight aspects of children's thinking with which teachers might have inadequate familiarity or experience in routine classroom settings. Because we wanted teachers to reflect on children's thinking—and not simply catalog what they knew and did not know—we chose a procedure that we thought would force them to confront children's conceptual understanding of important topics in history and social studies. A less open-ended task

(such as a test of factual content) might have provided teachers with new information on children's knowledge, however it seemed unlikely to expand their understanding of how children think. Meanwhile, a more open-ended task—one in which teachers were completely free to choose the questions and procedures—may well have resulted in a form of confirmation bias in which participants simply found evidence for what they already believed to be true. By using a structured but open-ended inquiry task, we hoped to maximize teachers' opportunity to reflect on children's thinking.

The interviews themselves were followed by in-class discussion of participants' findings and culminated in written essays in which they were asked to draw conclusions about children's thinking, to discuss their implications for curriculum and instruction (in the U.S. portion only), to compare their conclusions to those of their colleagues in the course and with academic researchers (in the Northern Ireland portion only), and to evaluate the assignment itself (Northern Ireland only). We included these components so that teachers might reflect more thoroughly and systematically on their findings. We hoped that class discussion would give participants the chance to articulate and explain their findings as well as to see how children's responses compared across grade levels and school settings. Written compositions, meanwhile, would require more careful thought and synthesis, as well as consideration of instructional implications or relevant research. We also hoped that writing would encourage participants to see their work in a context that extended beyond the requirements of a particular university assignment. All these components, we thought, would make the assignment more authentic and more in keeping with the rationale for taking part in action research.

RESULTS

Initial Ideas

In Northern Ireland and the United States, teachers began their course work concerned about what they perceived as a lack of connec-

tion between children's interests and abilities on one hand, and the skills and content they were expected to teach on the other. During initial discussions in Northern Ireland, teachers focused particularly on their concerns about how to make historical inquiry meaningful and understandable to young children. They spoke repeatedly of the importance of making the topic interesting and exciting, and of teaching children how history relates to them and the people they know; as one participant put it, "We have to help them appreciate that history means the changes happening all around them, and they're becoming part of history themselves." These responses illustrate the extent to which these prospective teachers had internalized the content and perspectives of their prior university course work in historical pedagogy: Their introduction to the topic had emphasized skills of historical inquiry, along with a constructivist approach that involved linking academic content to the interests and experiences of children. Teachers had learned the content of these courses well and were easily able to call forth that academic knowledge when asked to describe what they thought history should look like in the elementary grades. Their understanding of the topic accorded well with contemporary scholarship and with the content of the Northern Ireland curriculum.

Although teachers in Northern Ireland agreed that children should be engaged in the process of historical inquiry, and that history instruction should be connected to pupils' own experiences, they were much less confident about how to apply those principles to the classroom. Several groups struggled to explain how ideas such as evidence, inquiry, and multiple perspectives could be made intelligible to elementary children, despite their having worked through examples in their university courses. In addition, when asked what they hoped to get from their present course work, many emphasized the importance of learning how to simplify historical concepts, particularly for younger students. Some even suggested that such concepts are not appropriate until children are older. As one student said, "It's fine writing this all down in class, but how do we actually do it

with children?" Because they had little experience working with elementary children—and almost no experience teaching history to them—the knowledge they had acquired in university course work remained inert, in spite of the emphasis placed on introducing them to practical classroom approaches. Although they accepted a constructivist approach to history education at a theoretical level, they had almost no knowledge of how to apply that approach in the classroom. More significant, they were aware of this breach—they recognized the gap between theory and practice, and they were apprehensive about making the connection between the concepts they considered important and the abilities of the children they would soon face.

As noted previously, the teachers in the U.S. component of this study had much greater classroom experience. As a result, the problems that beginning teachers in Northern Ireland were apprehensive about—making the required curriculum meaningful, relevant, and comprehensible—were a part of U.S. teachers' everyday experience. They knew all too well that children often had difficulty learning social studies, that they did not always retain what they had covered in class, and that they might not even understand instruction as it was occurring. Moreover, these teachers recognized that creative and motivating instruction did not automatically solve this problem; as one of them related,

One thing I did that was interesting with my class is where you set up latitude in the class and you act it out, and I thought, "Oh, the kids got it, they definitely got it." And then you give it to them on paper and pencil just to transfer it—they didn't get it at all!

U.S. teachers constantly sought to make sense of these shortcomings in children's understanding, and one of their most common interpretations echoed the apprehensions of the Northern Ireland teachers: They suggested that children at certain ages were developmentally incapable of making sense of the content they were studying, particularly when it was abstract. Teachers repeatedly referred to students' ability or inability to understand various concepts, or to what they thought students could or

could not do at given ages. One noted, for example, that

some of the governmental concepts are really abstract, like the purposes of city government, and state government. . . . There are some of them that just weren't able to [grasp] it yet and couldn't explain things to you. It might be a developmental kind of [thing], I don't know.

Another suggested that students could not be expected to understand the concept of "10 years" until they had lived through 10 years themselves: "For a 7-year-old, a year to them is so long because they really cognitively don't start remembering things until maybe they're [older]. I think it's all based on age, what they can remember and relate to." This belief in developmental limitations was particularly clear when participants were asked what aspects of teaching social studies they needed to understand better: One of their chief desires was to find out how age and developmental level affected the concepts their students could learn. One participant, for example, lamented that a second-grade teacher might struggle with a concept for "months and months and months" without realizing that students would not be ready for it until third grade; another longed for someone who would say, "Oh, well, they're not going to understand that so don't even bother. They'll get it next year when they can actually understand."

A second explanation for children's lack of understanding focused on their inadequate background knowledge. Most participants in the focus group discussions worked in urban schools with predominantly poor and minority (particularly African American) populations, and they often explained that their students simply did not know enough to understand what they were being taught. One suggested that the reason students "can't place themselves in the world is that they don't have a lot of experience—they've barely been out of their neighborhood, let alone to another state or another country." Others thought that understanding history would be difficult because of students' limited experiences; one noted:

In the inner city, very few of my students even have a family history. You know, they have been shuffled around. Their mother had died. They didn't know their father. They were with an aunt for a while, or a grandparent for a while. As far as a stable, pleasant family history, just going back generations talking. . . . They don't even have that much history in their lives.

The idea that students' lack of experiences represented a major hurdle—even an insurmountable one—was a recurring theme in discussions with these teachers in the United States.

U.S. teachers also struggled to make sense of the implications of students' understanding for their own teaching. Some considered the most appropriate strategy to be more direct instruction: One, for example, explained that because government was hard for students to grasp, it "took a lot of reteaching and teaching and teaching for them to really understand. . . . It took a long time." Another noted the success of writing geography questions on the board and having students find the answers in the back of their textbooks; this was successful particularly because it was "something that kind of settles them into the afternoon." Some teachers, on the other hand, suggested that fun, games, and hands-on activities were more likely to lead to success. One noted, "I found that it's helpful, or at least the kids get into it, when it's a game," while another explained that a review activity

was almost like *Trivial Pursuit*, and I think when they see it in that kind of light they can relate to it more because they have a hard time realizing why they have to learn it in the first place.

Yet another teacher suggested that a geography activity was successful because

they made their own land forms and then they had a model that they could actually show other people. . . . We made cookie dough, like it was on a cookie sheet, and they made a plateau and a mountain range with the cookie dough and everything and they decorated it.

Missing from these responses were precisely the strategies necessary for developing children's conceptual understanding—namely, ways of building on their prior knowledge as a basis for teaching important content.

Ideas After Conducting the Inquiry Project

After conducting their inquiry projects, participants' discussions of teaching and learning had changed in important ways. In many cases, children's responses had challenged their understanding of what they did and did not know, and this appeared to help teachers recognize more completely their own role in developing children's ideas. Whereas they initially seemed to resign themselves to their students' shortcomings—explaining them as the result of inadequate cognitive development or lack of background knowledge—they now spoke primarily in terms of a newfound recognition of appropriate instructional techniques. Participants spent less time trying to explain away children's failures, and more time describing how they had begun to—and would continue to—emphasize conceptual understanding and build on students' background knowledge.

In Northern Ireland, where teachers had limited previous experience in classrooms, they particularly enjoyed the chance to talk individually with children, and they recognized that they could observe their thought processes better than they would be able to do once they began student teaching or had their own classrooms. As one put it, the task gave her the opportunity "to talk to children on a personal level without time restrictions or pressures from the rest of the class." At the same time, the assignment helped teachers gauge the limits of children's interest and attention, as they noted that their respondents were enthusiastic about talking about the photographs, but began to get tired and distracted by the end of the interviews. Because university students at this level often have limited practical involvement with children in educational settings, experiences like this are invaluable in helping them develop thoughtful and realistic expectations for student performance.

In their written evaluations and in interviews, it became clear that the task had also prompted teachers in Northern Ireland to reflect on other practical aspects of teaching and

learning. One of the most frequent observations was that the activity forced them to consider how they interacted with children; as one teacher said, she realized that “you need to be careful how much you interrupt or prompt the children.” In deciding when and how to give help to their respondents, teachers had to steer carefully between giving so many clues that they determined the children’s responses and saying so little that they were not able to engage in the task. One noted that the experience “highlighted the importance of when to question and when to hold back.” Knowing when and how to provide task assistance is a key characteristic of effective teaching, and this assignment put participants in a situation in which they had to make decisions about how to render such assistance most effectively.

The primary outcome of the assignment, though, was the expansion of teachers’ understanding of what children knew and were able to do in history, rather than of more general aspects of teaching and learning. As several pointed out, they often were surprised by children’s abilities and by their limitations. They recognized that there was progression in the way children thought through historical problems and that this generally was clear when comparing children in the lower and intermediate elementary grades. Progression was evident, they noted, in older children’s capacity to apply dating to their understanding of time, to their more considered, systematic, and abstract approach to the examination of evidence, and in their ability to identify with characters in the photographs in the context of the time in which they were living. The reflection that occurred as the result of these interactions represented, on a small scale, precisely the kind of situationally grounded inquiry into practice that forms the rationale for action research.

Many of these ideas were familiar through university course work and associated reading. However, one significant pattern that emerged in interviews with these teachers was that, although they accepted the rationale of the inquiry approach to history—as well as the importance of key concepts and skills in under-

standing that approach—their experience in schools to date had done little to convince them that primary children actually were capable of working in this way. Either they had not observed history being taught at all or, despite the intentions of the Northern Ireland curriculum, the history they did see was information based and was being presented in the same superficial fashion that they had experienced themselves. It emerged that it was the firsthand nature of the task that convinced many students of the legitimacy of the underlying assumptions of contemporary perspectives on history teaching. As one put it, “I feel that discussing other people’s results is not as effective as doing it yourself.” Another admitted to skepticism prior to undertaking the task:

I haven’t done a lot of history with children, so I hadn’t really thought too hard about how their minds work. I found my results very interesting and quite similar to those of my classmates. I also found that my results proved what we had learnt about in class and backed up the Northern Ireland curriculum. This was reassuring as well as reinforcing.

The chance to work with colleagues in the course seemed particularly important in developing their reflective and critical abilities. By comparing findings with peers, they came to appreciate the complexity of factors influencing learning and therefore the unevenness of progression with regard to individual children. It became apparent from these discussions, for example, that children’s responses were closely tied to their background knowledge and experiences. (A striking example of the influence of prior experience came when one child noted that during the Second World War, the Germans flew over Belfast and “dropped petrol bombs.”) As one teacher concluded, “Each child will have a slightly different understanding of historical concepts shaped by family living area, age, and circumstance.” Another suggested that children seemed more able to discuss photographs that related to their own experiences, such as those that depicted forms of recreation. A third applied her understanding of curricular differentiation by noting, “I would try the same task with a younger age group. . . . This would enable

me to see if children with a limited vocabulary and a lesser knowledge of life in the past could cope [with the task].”

The assignment also frequently prompted teachers to reflect on how their choice of materials—and the way they presented them— influenced children’s responses. For example, several concluded that responses would have been more complete if they had chosen a set of photographs focused on a single theme—such as housing or transport—because children often had difficulty comparing pictures with no common elements. Similarly, others noted that interviewees treated photographs as artifacts rather than as representations of a time period, and thus they regarded dark or unclear photographs as automatically older than clearer ones; they suggested that a more uniform set of pictures would have yielded different results. Still others commented on the influence of their tone of voice when asking questions or of the order in which they presented the pictures, and those who interviewed children in pairs noted how their responses influenced each other.

The careful selection and presentation of materials is a crucial aspect of effective teaching, and this task helped participants consider how children’s performance can be influenced by the materials they use and the contexts in which they use them. However, some teachers were led to even more critical consideration of the use of materials in representing history. Nearly all found themselves wondering whether the photographs portrayed particular time periods in a straightforward manner or whether they contained elements that required interpretation—would an old item of clothing or antique car mean that the picture came from that time, for example, or could it mean that people in later times still used those objects? The most obvious example of this reflection occurred when one participant came to class with an old postcard. The card (probably from the first quarter of the 20th century) showed a photograph of a “Native Irish Woman”—shawled, pipe smoking, with a dark, weather-beaten face, a basket of peat by her side—sitting atop rocks at a local natural landmark. The teacher asked us, almost embarrassed, “Is this

real?” The picture clearly did not match her prior understanding of women’s appearance during the early part of the century, and yet the photographic evidence was there in front of her. She approached this issue in the way that made most sense to her—by questioning the authenticity of the postcard—but her curiosity allowed us to initiate a stimulating dialogue about how photographs can represent others in a way that exoticizes them in accordance with the expectations and perceptions of the viewer. We also speculated on whether the woman in the photograph may have been posing for a fee and thus manipulating her own image; such posed images of rural primitiveness were a common feature of turn-of-the-century photography in the north of Ireland. These questions of representation and interpretation are at the heart of historical inquiry, and asking students to select their own pictures meant that they had to deal with them in a direct and practical way.

Similar patterns were evident among teachers in the United States. Several participants noted the assignment’s role in helping them gain a more accurate understanding of what students knew and how they reasoned. As one explained, she found that students had less knowledge than she expected “in some areas, and in other areas they have more knowledge than I thought.” This was particularly evident in the portion of the task in which teachers asked children to arrange historical pictures in chronological order. As one noted,

I was surprised at how much my students did know and the things that they actually used to determine their time periods. . . . They knew that back in the days with covered wagons that the ladies wore really long dresses and they’d never wear pants, and then they kind of related it to now, and how women can wear slacks.

Another observed,

It was interesting that all of the students were able to put the pictures in order correctly. And just as a teacher I would have never thought that the students would have had . . . the factual knowledge to be able to do this, and it was amazing to me to see that they could pull other things, such as like, the clothing, and the hairstyles, and just from their type of trans-

portation—use that to get them in order. I mean these are first graders.

The language of developmental readiness and the limitations of students' thinking abilities were entirely absent from the posttask interviews. Instead, participants often suggested the possibility of building on children's prior knowledge to take them to new levels of understanding. A first-grade teacher observed,

A lot of our students already knew a lot about Martin Luther King, just from kindergarten year, and just from being in the culture that my students are, they knew a lot, so I realized that we could have gone past that, and done more with them and brought them up to a level where they could have been doing maybe some research on their own, even in the first grade, because they already had the information.

Others explained how the project had enhanced their recognition of the necessity of seeking out children's prior ideas. One explained,

I just found out that I'm not going to assume anything when I teach. Not that I really did before, but this really let me see that. A lot of times I had no idea what a student might think about this, or what a student would think about that. So I think now especially with social studies, I'm going to look a lot more toward making sure I get at what they already know.

Similarly, one participant noted,

I know when I go into my position next year, whatever grade it is, I think I will really find out first what the students know each time. You know you have to have that starting point and know, 'Okay, this topic they know nothing about, and this topic they know everything about,' and so kind of gauge that.

As these quotes indicate, participants now recognized that students did indeed have prior knowledge that could be built on. Their newfound appreciation for the potential of students' experiences was perhaps the most striking change from the first to second set of focus group discussions in the United States. In the initial discussions, participants recognized the role of prior knowledge; however, because they perceived students as having few experiences relevant to learning social studies, they could see few opportunities for building on their previous understanding; they saw students' backgrounds almost entirely as a deficit. In this project, though, teachers discovered that children

did indeed have relevant knowledge and experience and that these could be used to develop the conceptual understandings required in the curriculum. One participant described her changing perspective this way:

Some of the students I chose were really low achievers and kids that didn't seem to be very interested in social studies class, and I picked them on purpose to see how they were doing. And it helped me because I felt like they knew that I cared about what they were thinking. And from that point on they did show a little more effort, or at least a little more interest, because they knew I cared what they thought. And it gave me a more positive attitude toward them for myself—just that they did know more than I thought they did, and so that helped to start rapport, which for those students is everything in terms of how they are during the day, how they feel they relate to you.

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

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

In Northern Ireland and the United States, then, the most noticeable change in participants' ideas was a shift away from an emphasis on shortcomings in students or curriculum and toward a recognition of the teacher's role in developing children's understanding. Participants dropped the language of cognitive ability or readiness and focused instead on ways they could assist students in developing conceptual understanding at any age, particularly by making connections to relevant background knowledge. Although these observations might apply across a range of teaching situations, we believe that the grounding of the task in specific disciplinary knowledge helped participants confront children's ideas in areas to which they might not otherwise have been exposed.

DISCUSSION

In many ways, the project was very structured, and it imposed a number of limitations on participants' inquiries: They were limited in the nature and number of questions under investigation, the kinds of materials they would use, and even the procedures they would undertake. We have no doubt that many educators would decline to even dignify this assignment with the label "action research," and perhaps some other term would indeed better describe the task. However, we imposed this structure in hopes that it would result in a successful inquiry experience revolving around an important topic. Based on our familiarity with academic research in history and social studies education, we felt confident these questions and procedures would lead to significant insights among the members of the course. At the same time, though, we did not want to structure the assignment so strictly that students were simply replicating settled conclusions about children's thinking in history. Our purpose was not simply to provide teachers with a hands-on experience with children's thinking; it was, rather, to engage them in a process that would help them become more critical and reflective practitioners, able to reach their own conclusions rather than simply accepting those of others, and to think about the application of their ideas to future practice. Thus some aspects of the assignment were left open to students' judgment—most important, the conclusions they reached about children's thinking and their connection to the findings of their colleagues and other scholars. We wanted to give our students the chance not only to apply research on children's historical thinking but also to expand or challenge it.

We obviously believe the project had a number of benefits. Teachers in both countries found the experience empowering, for it provided them with a sense of their own potential effectiveness as teachers. For those in Northern Ireland, who had limited experience working with children, the task led them to give serious thought to how children learn history and to

how the teacher can facilitate this learning through appropriate task setting, questioning, and materials selection. In the United States, where more experienced teachers had already grappled with children's difficulty learning social studies, this project allowed them to move past their perception of deficits and to consider ways of capitalizing on students' backgrounds so that they might develop greater conceptual understanding.

One of our most important tasks as teacher educators is to help students understand how children construct knowledge, and assignments similar to this can enable them to move beyond the assumption that pupils are simply blank slates on whom teachers can inscribe information. Although students are likely to feel comfortable with such a constructivist approach to literacy and mathematics education, their lower level of confidence and background knowledge with regard to history often prevents them from seeing the discipline in quite the same way as language and mathematics; assignments similar to this one can help them consider the complex mix of experience, interest, development, and practice that influences a child's performance. As Lee (2000) noted, focusing on children's ideas tends to "generate excitement among teachers more readily than the abstract claims of unmediated learning theory" (p. 4). A task such as this can provide the direct exposure to discipline-specific features of children's thinking that not only generates excitement but also leads to ongoing engagement with critical features of teaching and learning—an engagement that is necessary to master the technical skills required to become a teacher.

Perhaps more important, participants' struggle with the dissonance between children's performance and their own prior ideas suggests that the project may have stimulated a process of reflection that extended beyond the particular task components used in this assignment. Thus the larger significance of undertakings such as this may lie in their potential to allow teacher educators to navigate between the reality of centralized, standards-based reforms on the one hand, and the need to develop critical,

reflective practitioners on the other. This opportunity to engage in critical reflection has important implications for a critique of the nature of teacher education that has emerged in the United Kingdom in the wake of the implementation of national curricula in the 1990s. Put starkly, one history teacher educator suggested that there is a danger of producing elementary teachers who are “technical apparatchniks uncritically delivering a centralized agenda” (Crawford, 1998). Moves in the United States toward standardized state-level curricula, and the accompanying high-stakes testing systems, point to the need for educators on both sides of the Atlantic to pay attention to this set of issues.

At the core of the critique is the view that the forces shaping the national agenda in the United Kingdom have resulted in a prescribed curriculum that threatens teacher professionalism and autonomy in the classroom. Proponents of action research have been particularly critical. Elliott, MacLure, and Sarland (1997) claimed that the consequence is that “curriculum and pedagogy are no longer perceived by teachers to be areas in which they are free to conduct innovative experiments to improve children’s learning since the curriculum is prescribed and what is prescribed shapes pedagogy” (p. 11). The implication of this, according to Goddard (1993), is that the teacher

operates as a technician who can be slotted into any situation with the task of . . . delivering the specified national curriculum. The task is to teach, not to understand how children learn in order to develop approaches in the classroom and a school that promotes real learning. (p. 47)

The argument goes on to point out the emphasis placed in teacher education on “technical rationality” (Tickle, 1994)—which, particularly at preservice level, concentrates on a competence- and standards-based approach to assessing teacher performance—works to the detriment of teachers contextualizing their work within their own situational and personality frameworks. Moses (1998) concluded that “there is a sense in which recent emphases on the development of skill orientated competencies and the acquisition of standards for the

purpose of assessing performance might be viewed as having dehumanized teaching” (p. 3). Recent investigations with student teachers suggest that in tightly packed, subject-focused, competence-oriented teacher education programs, there is a danger that dimensions of values and critical questioning become peripheral in terms of teachers’ priorities (Montgomery & McCully, 1999; Walkington & Wilkins, 1999).

Such literature paints a bleak picture of the capacity of teachers in the future to critically challenge prevailing orthodoxies within the system. Yet Hutchinson and Whitehouse (1999) noted the paradoxical nature of policy recommendations within the United Kingdom. If one favored position is that teachers become adept at a set of merely banal skills, another is that teaching should be a research-based profession (Hargreaves, 1997). As we noted in the introduction, a developing consensus—applicable to the United Kingdom and North America—holds that teachers benefit from inquiry into teaching and learning. Although Hutchinson and Whitehouse (1999) contended that the current technicist models of teacher development are incompatible with the true principles of action research, other pragmatic voices argue that the competency framework is with us for the foreseeable future and, therefore, must be reshaped to ensure that young teachers evolve into critical, reflective educators—practitioners who can eventually undertake meaningful action research. The question then arises, how can these critical and autonomous dimensions be fostered within the constraints of a prescribed curriculum?

We suggest that the project described here played a role in initiating teachers—in a small but effective way—into a conception of teaching as critical, reflective inquiry. Students were not learning to implement unquestioningly a standardized set of procedures but were engaged in developing their own conclusions about instructional interactions, children’s cognition, and the selection and use of materials. By doing so, one hopes that they were being put on a road toward professional classroom

empowerment, and that this ultimately will challenge any restricted view of themselves as mere deliverers of a set curriculum. Within these two groups of teachers, there was ample evidence that participants gave serious thought to how children learn and to how the teacher can facilitate this learning. In turn, the inquiry encouraged many of them to identify new questions that raised their awareness of the “teacher as researcher” (Stenhouse, 1975). As one student in Northern Ireland noted,

I would be interested in exploring gender differences. I only spoke to one boy as opposed to three girls, but there was definitely a difference in his interests. He looked in different places for his clues about the pictures and seemed to look in different places to the girls. Obviously because of the small number I dealt with I couldn't make definite statements about this, but it would be interesting to test the theory.

For this student, as for many in both countries, the task provided the opportunity to reflect on the value of educational inquiry. Students had at least begun to grasp the process of critical reflective practice, as measured against the characteristics identified by O'Neill (1998):

This process typically involves the teacher in asking questions of his/her self and his/her practice and through the mediation of a teacher tutor, reflection of classroom practice struggling to develop a language of pedagogy grounded in the real contexts of learners. (p. 8)

These teachers may one day construct more extensive, more sophisticated procedures of action research and classroom inquiry on precisely such initial foundations.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Ball and Cohen (1999) argued for a model of professional education that revolves around inquiry into practice. In their view, teachers cannot simply be provided with a stable body of knowledge, which they will then enact in classrooms. Instead, they must learn how to investigate and interpret children's ideas and understandings and to use such inquiries to improve their own teaching. They did not argue that

teachers should become researchers per se, nor even teacher-researchers, but rather that “a stance of inquiry should be central to the role of teacher” (p. 11). This would involve careful attention to evidence of students' learning, well-reasoned analysis and judgment, and a collaborative community of professional discourse. We believe the inquiry task described here provides a concrete example of how such a “pedagogy of investigation” (p. 13) can be initiated among beginning teachers.

We set out to investigate how this task would affect teachers' ideas about children's thinking in history and social studies and how teachers themselves would evaluate the usefulness of the project. In written and oral reflections, teachers consistently pointed to the value of the project in helping them better understand children's learning and their own teaching. Most striking, they appeared to develop an appreciation of the necessity of inquiry as a basis for practice. Participants were initially concerned with identifying the developmental or experiential limitations that prevented children from learning what they were taught—a “rhetoric of conclusions,” as Ball and Cohen (1999, p. 16) put it. By the time of the posttask interviews, however, these same teachers had shifted to a “narrative of inquiry” (p. 17), in which they described how the task had transformed their understanding of children's ideas and of their own potential as teachers. Of course, they might have given the task too much credit for transforming their understanding. Their continuing experiences in classrooms, their developing instructional skills, and even the content of their university course work probably combined to produce some of their new ideas, and this study was not designed to control for such a variety of factors. However, regardless of the extent to which the inquiry task may have caused new ideas to develop, it clearly provided the occasion for such development, and we think there are three principal factors that made this development possible. Each of these points to potentially fruitful avenues for designing tasks that may become part of a pedagogy of investigation in teacher education.

First, the task challenged participants' prior assumptions. Teachers in Northern Ireland suspected that the skills of disciplinary history were inappropriate for young children, whereas those in the United States thought their students had few experiences relevant to required curricular content—even going so far as to suggest, in one case, that urban children do not have a family history. We knew from our reading of academic research and our experience working with children and teachers that this task would result in responses that were at odds with such assumptions. Afterward, participants recognized that the assignment had challenged their assumptions, and they often identified this as its uniquely valuable contribution. Ball and Cohen (1999) suggested that learning from practice requires such disequilibrium: An investigation that confirms prior beliefs is unlikely to serve as a stimulus to improved practice. Although more experienced teachers might be willing and able to design investigations that involve such challenges; these beginning teachers, if left to their own devices, probably would not have asked children to respond to questions similar to these. Indeed, fellow teachers sometimes warned them against trying to implement the task we set for them, because they already "knew" (erroneously) that young children could not put historical pictures in chronological order. This points to the crucial role of experienced teacher educators, whether based in schools or universities, in designing inquiry tasks for beginners. Promoting a pedagogy of investigation does not involve abdicating responsibility for directing teachers' experiences but requires instead a clear sense of how such investigations can enhance their learning.

At the same, the assignment was not too structured. Although the task was designed to produce a particular type of response, participants were free to reach their own conclusions from those results, and they made the most of this freedom. In retrospect, we probably expected that teachers would develop conclusions about children's disciplinary thinking similar to those of academic researchers—"Children's

ability to sequence historical images develops earlier than their ability to assign dates," "Children recognize national symbols without understanding the underlying structure of government," and so forth. Indeed, many teachers in these studies clearly stated such conclusions in their written compositions. In verbal and written reflections on the value of the task, however, teachers emphasized more practice-oriented conclusions: They reported learning how the choice of materials affected children's responses, how the phrasing of questions provided task assistance, or even how long children could sit still. In addition, particularly in the United States, they reported learning the necessity of asking children what they knew—a critical observation that extends beyond any specific disciplinary considerations. The freedom to draw a variety of conclusions from their experience may have been the factor that made this task a relevant pedagogical inquiry rather than a simple university assignment.

Finally, we believe that conducting inquiry within a community of professional discourse is essential. In Northern Ireland and the United States, participants were expected to share their findings and conclusions publicly with their colleagues. This was a popular part of the assignment. In fact, the most common criticism of the task was that more time should have been devoted to such discussions, and we agree completely with that observation. In the Northern Ireland study, few participants synthesized children's answers to reach more general or abstract conclusions about their historical thinking. Some of their written assignments were purely descriptive: They reported how children responded to each question or prompt and then summed up these responses. Similarly, they often engaged with published research by finding isolated quotations that appeared to have some connection (frequently tangential) to their findings. This suggested to us that instructors might spend more time collectively discussing the implications of the findings with participants—encouraging teachers to talk through the results to reach generalizations, to compare them with existing research

and, critically, to consider the implications for classroom teaching. In the U.S. study, we built somewhat more time for discussion into class meetings, but participants still expressed frustration with the inadequate attention devoted to the topic. Ball and Cohen (1999) noted that encouraging this kind of professional discourse requires confronting powerful cultural norms that limit what teachers feel comfortable discussing, and our project barely scratched the surface of such issues. The fact that it was the teachers themselves who clamored for more discussion, though, suggests that this is a potentially powerful component of practice-based inquiry.

In conclusion, we must stress that this task is not meant to represent a model for all inquiry into practice, even within elementary history and social studies. Rather, we tried to use these small-scale case studies to explore the conditions that might promote a culture of inquiry among beginning teachers. Our experience suggests that by engaging teachers in tasks that challenge their assumptions, allowing them the freedom to draw their own conclusions, and providing a context for collaborative discussion, teacher educators may encourage the skills and dispositions necessary for practice-based inquiry.

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APPENDIX 1 Focus Group Interview Protocols

Northern Ireland focus group protocol

What did students know most about? Least about?
What were they able to do?
What did you find surprising?

What did the work/assignment do for your understanding of the process of history?
What would you need to make this work practical for teaching history in the classroom?
How has it influenced your view of how children think and learn?

U.S. pretask focus group protocol

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

U.S. posttask focus group protocol

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

APPENDIX 2

Inquiry Task Assignments

NORTHERN IRELAND

Children's thinking in history

You are being asked to participate in a study of primary-age children's understanding of the key historical concepts of time, chronology, and change.

Identify two children as participants for your research, one of Key Stage 1 and the other of Key Stage 2 age, respectively. In groups of three or four, prepare five visual sources from widely spread historical periods.

Ask each of the children in turn to arrange them in chronological order and explain how they know what order they go in. You should ask them to describe what they see, what they find interesting, what has changed since then, and how might life have been different then for characters in the pictures. Ask them to make suggestions as to how long ago/what period/what dates are represented in each picture. In carrying out these exercises, you should engage with the children to help them clarify their thinking.

In addition, select two male and two female characters from history that you think the children may know of. Test their knowledge and understanding of these characters, for example, "What can you tell me about Florence Nightingale?"

Your assignment task is to describe, record, and critically analyze your experiment, for example:

- What did you learn about children's thinking?
- Were your participants appropriately chosen?
- How would you change your approach or your materials if you were to do this assignment again?
- How did your findings compare with others in your group?
- Do your findings support or contradict academic research?

Your materials should be submitted with the assignment. We would also like to use your experiences to help other prospective teachers in learning how to work with young children. Please submit a separate page (which may be anonymous) in which you reflect on how the assignment has helped you understand children's thinking, and how you suggest it be improved in the future.

UNITED STATES

Interview analysis

Being a teacher means becoming a knowledgeable and reflective professional—one who understands how students think and learn; who is familiar with a wide range of

instructional methods, materials, and resources; and who continually examines the effectiveness of his or her instruction. An essential part of this development is teacher inquiry—the process of asking questions about student learning; collecting information and locating resources; planning instruction; and reflecting on the effectiveness of teaching. This assignment provides the opportunity to undertake a structured and rewarding inquiry project that can be integrated into your field experience. As you grow and mature as a teacher, you should be able to apply the skills you develop during this assignment in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes.

To complete this assignment, you will choose six to eight students from your field placement and conduct a structured interview with them in pairs; the interview form is attached. After completing the interviews, you will identify three or four main conclusions you have reached—these conclusions must be generalizations that identify patterns in students' responses. In your essay, explain each of your three to four conclusions in a separate paragraph and support each with the use of specific examples from students' responses. Then choose one or more of your conclusions about children's thinking and, in separate paragraphs, explain how these might affect the teaching and learning of social studies content; you might, for example, explain what background knowledge or interests students have that a teacher could build on, what misconceptions he or she would need to address, or what concepts students would have to master before moving on to the requirements of state or local standards.

Student interview

Explain to students that you want to find out what they think about social studies and what they are interested in. Explain that you will show them some pictures and ask them some questions about what they know. Tell them that some questions might be too easy or too hard, and that if there are any they do not know the answer to, it is okay to say, "I don't know." Ask if they have any questions before you start.

Show students the first two pictures 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 why they think it goes there.

Ask: Did you think this was easy or hard to do (and why)? Which ones did you think were easiest (and why)? Which ones were hardest (and why)? Which pictures do you think are the most interesting (and why)?

Pick one picture and ask: 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?

Tell students that now you are going to ask some more questions that are not just about the pictures. Emphasize again that some questions might be hard and some might be easy and that it is okay to say, "I don't know."

- 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 are elected.)
- Who do you think are some of the most famous people who have ever lived? What can you tell me about him/her/them? Can you think of any famous people from history who are not from the United States? Who's the most important woman you've ever heard of?
- (Show picture of George Washington) Do you know who this is? Tell me something about him. (Tell students who it is if necessary.)
- (Show picture of Martin Luther King) Do you know who this is? Tell me something about him. (Tell students who it is if necessary.)
- 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?
- Do you know what taxes are? What are they used for? Who decides how much taxes will be?
- What is a bank for? What happens when you put your money in a bank?
- If you put your money in a bank and then you want to take it all 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, do you have to pay back the same amount you borrowed, more than you borrowed, or less than you borrowed? Why?
- What city do you live in? Can you tell me the names of some other cities?
- What state do you live in? Can you tell me the names of some other states?
- What country do you live in? Can you tell me the names of some other countries?
- What things are different in other parts of the world? How are they different? Why are they different?
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