LEARNING HISTORY

Linda S. Levstik

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Interest in history education is rooted in fundamental questions about what students can and should learn about how the world came to be the way it is, about how power, inclusion and exclusion operate in the world, and about how an understanding of the past might influence the present and the future. Because history is never a neutral force or a complete worldview, arguments persist about whose history appears in (or disappears from) the curriculum, how history is taught and learned, and for what purposes (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Epstein, 2008; Seixas, 2004; Thornton, 2004, 2008; Wineburg, 2001). These arguments show little sign of disappearing any time soon (Berkin, Crocco & Winslow, 2009; Thornton, 2004). None of this should be surprising given disciplinary history’s shifts and upheavals. In the US, the dominant narrative of national history with which the last century began fractured into multiple and often-contending narratives with more consideration for the role such narratives played in preserving and challenging power relationships (Blight, 2002; Bodnar, 1993; Willinsky, 2000).

EXAMINING STUDENT LEARNING ABOUT HISTORY:
THEORETICAL SHIFTS

History educators long argued that some form of reflective inquiry provided a coherent and disciplinarily appropriate theoretical and pedagogical base for learning history (see Griffin, 1992, orig. 1942). Beginning in the 1960s, as the structure of the disciplines movement (Bruner, 1960) gained influence, history educators in the United Kingdom and the United States generated an array of inquiry-based curricular proposals. In one of the earliest studies to investigate the impact of such inquiries on students’ learning in history, Shemilt (1980) reported that secondary students found inquiry more challenging, worthwhile, and interesting than traditional lecture-based instruction, and students displayed a more sophisticated use of evidence than had been common in other assessments of students’ historical writing. By the late 1980s, emerging theories regarding pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987; Wilson & Wineburg, 1988)
and domain-specific cognition (Alexander & Judy, 1988) led researchers on both sides of the Atlantic to focus more particularly on the nature of “expert” historical practice and novice-to-expert shifts (reviewed in Downey & Levstik, 1991). Using a combination of video observation, student interviews, and analysis of students’ written and oral responses to historical stimuli (eliciton tasks), investigators postulated patterns in students’ historical thinking. This approach—eliciting student thinking in the context of a historical task—is indicative of a broader movement among researchers examining thought in process rather than extrapolating thinking based on recall of out-of-context historical information.

Early in the 1990s, proponents of sociocultural or cultural-historical theories of cognitive development began challenging the individualist orientation of these early cognitive studies (Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1991). Describing learning as culturally and historically situated and culturally contextualized, they argued that social interaction was fundamental to cognition (Bereiter, 1994, Moll, 2013). Wertsch’s (1998) conception of mediated action was particularly influential in this regard. Wertsch (1998) described thinking as socially, culturally, and historically situated, but also as mediated by agents using an array of cultural tools, including history, for a variety of often-conflicting purposes. Using his own work in Estonia as an example, he demonstrated how students came to resist “official” histories and rely on alternative narratives. In similar fashion, other researchers drew on sociocultural theory in explaining some African American students’ resistance to school histories (Epstein, 2008) as well as students’ ascriptions of historical significance to people, events, and ideas in different cultural contexts (Barton & McCully, 2005; Bourdieu, 1980; Grenfell and James, 1998; Rüsen, 2004; Seixas, 1993; Levstik, 2001).

Among the purposes ascribed to history education, acquiring disciplinary “ways of knowing” and developing some form of historical consciousness or democratic humanism have been among the most prominent (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Lee, 2004; Parker, 2002; Rüsen, 2004; Seixas, 2004: Simon, 2006; Wineburg, 2001). Rüsen’s (2004) conception of historical consciousness, for instance, made a civic case for locating students in a temporal whole larger than an individual life in order to inform present and future problem-solving (Rüsen, 2004). There is little evidence, however, that students easily transfer what they learn in history classes to the larger civic arena (Aitkin & Sinnema, 2008; Arthur et al., 2001; Clark, 2004). Rather, as Hodkinson, Biesta & James (2008) argue, learning evolves in the interrelationship of learners’ past life histories; learning situations; and wider social, economic, and political contexts. Students’ impact on, and agency within, a learning culture would, then, be mediated by their dispositions towards that culture as well as by their social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1980; Hodkinson et al., 2008). One outgrowth of these theoretical shifts has been a varied and robust set of research findings that offer insight into students’ ideas about the past and suggest ways in which classroom practice might better support learning for transfer in and beyond the classroom.

**STUDENT LEARNING**

History education researchers have relied primarily on naturalistic/descriptive inquiry to examine historical thinking, although a recent upswing in quantitative studies suggests increasing methodological variety (cf. Heafner & Fitchett, 2012). A broad consensus of the research literature on learning history can be summarized as follows: Children
begin developing ideas about the past at an early age. They enter school able to identify ways in which life changes over time and their ideas tend to become more sophisticated as they advance in school (Lee & Ashby, 2000, 2001; Barton, 2002; Cooper & Chapman, 2009; Downey, 1996; Harnett, 1993; Lynn, 1993; Seixas, 1994; Vella, 2001). Even in early school years, students can sequence broad historical eras with reasonable accuracy by drawing on changes in material and popular culture (Barton & Levstik, 1996; Foster, Hoge, & Rosch, 1999; Harnett, 1993; Hoodless, 2002; Kang, 2010; van Boxtel & van Drie, 2004). Over time, they are more likely to identify long-term social and political patterns related to national development and to have reference to alternative histories that may challenge national history presented in school (Apostolidou, 2008; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 2008, Epstein & Shiller, 2009; Howard, 2004; Korber, 1997; Yeager, Foster, & Geer, 2002; Seixas, 2004; Urietta, 2004; Yeager & Terzian, 2007). Even young students possess the intellectual flexibility to recognize and respect other perspectives, to understand that perspectives change over time, to identify cultural pattern and variety, to identify differences in agency available to historical actors and to apply these understandings to real world issues (Barca, Castro, & Amaral, 2010; Carretero, Castorina, & Levinas, 2013; Colley, 2015; Levstik, Henderson & Lee, 2014; Saye & Brush, 2002; Schumann, Zaki & Dweck, 2014; Schweber, 2008; Wills, 2005; Wineburg, Mosborg, & Porat, 2007).

Two significant caveats accompany these findings. First, increased inquiry into macro social and cultural contexts suggests that student learning is influenced by national narratives; by narratives of identity, including race, gender, and ethnicity; and by narratives of global interaction. Second, learning’s relationship to the instructional contexts in which students encounter the past results in significant opportunity gaps for poor, minority, and immigrant students (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012).

**National Narratives**

Studies suggest that national contexts influence the degree to which students understand their history as a story of progress and/or decline, hope and/or discouragement, conflict and/or consensus (Arnot, Chege & Wawire, 2012; Greenwalt, 2009; Obenshain, Bellows, Bernat & Smith, 2013). Barring a significant disjunction between home and school identities, students tend not to seek alternatives to prevailing national narratives, or to account either for significant differences in perspective among people living in the past or, more broadly, between past and present. (Apostolidou, 2008; Barton, 2002, 2005; King, 2009; Kolbl & Straub, 2001; Levstik, 2001; Seixas, 2004; Wertsch, 1998). Further, students tend to ignore the impact of differential agency on human behavior, reducing some people to historical shadows and exaggerating the agency of others (McGarry, 2013; Aitken & Sinnema, 2008; Yeager, Foster & Geer, 2002). Disjunctions between home and school or between local and national identities also increase the likelihood that students will turn to alternative or vernacular histories (Epstein, 2008; Epstein & Shiller, 2009; Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007; Raupach, 2008, Seixas, 1994).

Vernacular histories serve as filters through which students view the texts, tasks, and historical interpretations introduced in school—a pattern that repeats in different national settings (Audigier & Fink, 2010; Flanagan, 2013; Hawkey & Prior, 2011; Haebeli, 2005; Misco, 2008; Rosenzweig & Thelan, 2000; Wertsch, 1998). Importantly, such histories give voice to marginalized racial and cultural groups and call attention to people, ideas and events often left out of or misrepresented in official histories. They can also perpetuate larger social divisions, leading students to disconnect from
school histories (Apostolidou, 2008; Barton & McCully, 2006; Hawkey & Prior, 2011; Porat, 2004). Engaging students in the analysis of competing historical narratives can motivate interest and encourage students to consider the civic and humanitarian purposes of historical study, but such engagements may encounter resistance, especially in divided societies (Kolikant & Pollack, 2007). Finally, as Peck (2010) notes, variations in student responses to official and vernacular histories vary across a number of vectors. Students learn in multi-identity contexts, and their thinking cannot be seen as invariant within racial/ethnic/cultural groups or even persistent in the learning of a single student over time.

**Narratives of Global Interaction and Deep History**

Global or world history and history that examines the most distant reaches of the human past are particularly vulnerable to national contexts. Newer approaches to world history encompass explorations of patterns, connections, and comparisons within limited frames of time and space as well as within “large scales of change” (Dunn, 2009, p. 184). Little of this modern work, however, ends up in schools, at least in the United States. And, despite attention to global education among social studies researchers, few scholars investigate how students learn world history (Zong, Wilson, & Quashiga, 2008). Recent attempts at developing large-scale world histories have not been the subject of systematic investigation regarding student learning. In one of the few studies to examine student learning in a global context, students failed to develop the deep understandings of global patterns and connections hoped for in the program under study (Squires, 2004).

Studies of archaeology-based student inquiry have produced more optimistic results. Davis (2005) noted that archaeological study supported inquiry skill development. Levstik, Henderson & Lee (2014) found that engaging students in archaeological inquiries focused on human tool use and technological development led students to identify broad cultural patterns that connected people and places over time. More commonly, however, researchers find that students’ knowledge of historical periods and patterns of development tend to be simplified and rarely address global patterns (Barca, Castro & Amaral, 2010; Carretero, Castorina & Levinas, 2013).

**Gender as Content and Context**

It is remarkable how few history education researchers attend to the influence of gender on student learning, either as an analytical lens for historical inquiry, as historical content, or as a sociocultural characteristic of students (Berkin, Crocco & Winslow, 2009; Crocco, 2008; Monaghan, 2014). Existing studies focus primarily on analyzing how students understand women’s historical experiences (Colley, 2015; Levstik, 2001; Levstik & Groth, 2002; Monaghan, 2014). In one of the earliest of these studies, ten Dam & Rijkschroeff (1996) found that female students taking a required women’s history course in the Netherlands tended to do better than male students on assessments in women’s history, but disliked the perceived emphasis on women as historical victims. Levstik & Groth (2002) found that students in middle schools identified women’s history as important, but worried that they might miss out on “real” history if they spent time on women’s experiences. Secondary students in Colley’s (2015) study also described women’s history as important, identifying different perspectives and opportunities for agency among and between male and female
historical actors, but they lacked content background to more accurately support their interpretations.

Although there is attention to the inclusion of LGBT experiences in the history curriculum (see Rethinking Schools, 2014), there is little research on student learning in this regard. Students rarely have access to LGBT inclusive curricula and some schools explicitly prohibit such inclusion (McGarry, 2013). Fewer then 20% of students surveyed in GLSEN’s 2013 study reported experiencing any positive attention to LGBT in school, although history/social studies classes were the most likely sites for inclusive teaching and learning (Kosciw et al., 2012; McGarry, 2013).

**Instructional Contexts and Mediation**

The second caveat in regard to student learning in history, instructional mediation, appears repeatedly in the research literature. Without instruction to the contrary, students tend to expect history to be a finished, objective, non-interpretive narrative of the past, for which they rarely require evidence (Ashby, 2004, 2005; Audigier & Fink, 2010; Hsiao, 2005; Lee & Ashby, 2001). They do not expect alternate interpretations, rarely attend to historical accounts as “authored” and do not seek explanations for any interpretive differences they do encounter (Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001, Barca, 2005; Bermudez & Jaramilla, 2001; Boix Mansilla, 2005; Britt & Aglintas, 2002; Ferratti, MacArthur, & Okolo, 2001; Gago, 2005; Kohlmeier, 2005; VanSledright, 2002; VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005; VanSledright & Frankes, 2000). Without opportunities for the purposeful use of the tools of historical inquiry, then, students appear unlikely to ascribe humanistic and civic purposes to their study of the past.

**Learning the Tools of Historical Inquiry: Second Order Concepts**

While first order concepts refer to the content of history—the agrarian revolution, the rise of empires, human rights movements—little research attends to how students acquire specific historical content or how different historical content influences students’ thinking about the past. In contrast, second-order concepts—the intellectual tools used to both understand how the history students encounter came to be known and to create their own evidence-based interpretations of the past—receive considerable attention (Barton, 2001; Cooper, 1992; Fasulo, Girardet & Pontecorvo, 1998; Peck & Seixas, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2012; VanSledright, 2005; Wineburg, 2001). Although inquiry-based history instruction has been more common in some parts of the world than in the United States, in 2014 the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) introduced a four-dimension “inquiry arc,” which includes question setting, working with sources/evidence, building evidence-based interpretations, and taking civic action, as recommended pedagogy for all the social studies. Some of these dimensions rest on a deeper research base than others.

Question setting, for instance, has implications for motivation and civic action, as well as for implementing historical inquiries in the classroom, yet it is the least researched of the dimensions of inquiry (Croddy & Levine, 2014; Oliveira et al., 2010). Further, teachers responsible for helping students develop inquiry-worthy questions often struggle themselves in developing such questions (Aguiar, Mortimer, & Scott, 2010; Rothstein & Santana, 2013). Rossi and Pace (1998) found that choosing a question powerful enough to motivate inquiry into “meaningful and significant themes” was a significant problem for teachers (p. 405). Dull and Morrow (2008) identified
this as an equity issue, as questions that “encourage students to interpret texts, make connections, solve problems, support or dispute ideas, and/or ask further questions” occurred most often in high-ability, low-diversity schools (p. 398).

In contrast to question setting, learning to read and understand historical sources has received considerable research attention. While source and evidence tend to be conflated in discussions of historical inquiry, they are not quite the same thing. A source—an object, person, or place from or about a historical idea or event—becomes evidence only when a historical question is in play. Photographs of a 19th-century Settlement house, for instance, could be evidence of changing photographic technologies, of class and gender in social movements, or of the professionalization of altruism. Students analyze a source—identify its provenance, reliability, and perspective—in order to decide on its evidentiary suitability relative to a specific historical question. This is a challenging task for all ages.

The majority of studies of students’ learning in relation to historical sources focus on either written or visual/photographic sources. Overall, students tend not to recognize the need to analyze or interpret such sources or to consider that similar sources might provide evidence to support quite different interpretations (Ashby, 2004; Ferretti, MacArthur & Okolo, 2001, Lee & Ashby, 2000). They understand historical inquiry to work much like a jigsaw puzzle whose aim consists of creating a single correct picture of the past (Levstik, Henderson, & Schlarb, 2005; Medina, Pollard, Schneider & Leonhard, 2000; VanSledright, 2002). Further, rather than consider how human intention and cultural contexts might influence the form and original meanings of sources, students more often account for differences in interpretation in terms of bias or incomplete information (Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001; Britt & Aglinskas, 2002; Foster et al., 1999; Kohlmeier, 2005; VanSledright, 2002, von Borries, 1997; Wineburg, 2001). They tend also to assess the reliability of written sources based on the quantity or specificity of information provided by the source rather from any other form of corroboration, and consider interpretation a matter of balancing rather than evaluating sources (Ashby, 2004; Barca, 2005; Boix Mansilla, 2005; Ferretti et al., 2001; Gago, 2005; Kohlmeier, 2005 VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005; VanSledright & Frankes, 2000).

Historic sites, museums, and material culture present additional challenges. Historic sites, for instance, have been found to help students imagine the physical contexts for historical activity, but can be confusing as students try to connect what they observe with docents’ explanations or explanatory signage (Woodacre & Baldwin, 2005; Levstik, Henderson & Schlarb, 2005). Museum collections present an even more profound information processing challenge by virtue of the sheer enormity of their collections. Inexperienced museum-goers are particularly vulnerable to confusion, especially if their experiences are not carefully scaffolded (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Marcus, Levine, Grenier, 2012). Similarly, although students may examine historical artifacts with enthusiasm, without careful instructional intervention, they may misunderstand the human agency and innovation in play at a particular time and place, interpreting past activity in the light of present sensibilities (Davis, 2005; Falk & Kierking, 2000; Levstik, Henderson & Lee, 2014).

Relatively minor scaffolding combined with questions that motivate historical inquiry have been found to enhance students’ facility with different types of sources (Ashby, 2004; Barton, 2001; Britt & Aglinskas, 2002; Hoodless, 2003, Kohlmeier, 2005; Levstik & Groth, 2002; VanSledright, 2002). Specifically, there is a positive impact when students experience a combination of hard (written or technologically based directions) and soft (point-of-need interventions) scaffolding as they use historical sources...
Learning History • 121

(Saye & Brush, 2005; Saye, Kohlmeier, Brush et al., 2009; Swan & Hofer, 2008). Without soft scaffolding, students encounter difficulties in selecting and analyzing sources, following through on web-based instructions, and navigating unfamiliar interfaces (Hicks & Doolittle, 2008; Saye & Brush, 2005; Swan & Hofer, 2013). They also tend to uncritically download data and record factual information, with little or no attempt at synthesis (Hicks and Doolittle, 2008). When teachers provide point-of-need/soft scaffolding, however, students more often draw on historical information, include multiple perspectives, and account for counterarguments in their historical presentations than do students in traditionally instructed comparison groups (Saye & Brush, 2005; Brush & Saye, 2001). Further, increasing opportunities for students to engage in historical inquiry, particularly with more experienced mentors, has produced similar results, even with minimal hard scaffolding (Ashby, 2004; Kohlmeier, 2005; Voss & Wiley, 1997; Wiley & Voss, 1999; Yeager, Foster, Maley, Anderson & Morris, 1998).

Sustaining these gains remains a challenge. Students tend to abandon evidence in order to maintain narrative cohesion (Stahl, Britton, Hynd, McNish et al., 1996; Young & Leinhardt, 1998), and to be more critical when sources touch on sensitive local issues than when sources conform to their own social and political perspectives (Epstein, 2008; Levstik, 2001; VanSledright, 2002).

Because of its centrality to building evidence-based interpretations and to civic engagement, perspective recognition has also been the subject of considerable research and debate. In 2001, Lee and Ashby conducted one of the larger studies on the progression of student thinking about historical perspective. Based on their analysis of 320 students’ written responses to perspective recognition tasks and follow-up studies with a subset of 92 of these students, Lee and Ashby (2001) noted the difficulty students had in setting aside their own perspectives when analyzing historical experiences and identified a linear progression beginning with seeing the past as largely unintelligible and culminating with students placing human actions within a broader sociocultural context. More closely aligned with Knight’s (1990) earlier research arguing for differential development of a set of sub-competencies, Barton and Levstik’s (2004) synthesis of research on perspective recognition led them to identify five competencies related to the development of perspective recognition: a sense of otherness, shared normalcy, historical contextualization, differentiation of perspectives, and contextualization of the present, with the latter being the most challenging intellectual task for students of all ages. Just as students tend to be less critical of sources that conform to their own perspectives, they also often dismiss opposing perspectives as ill-informed or in error (Apostolidou, 2008; Levstik, 2001). In related findings, educators’ tendency to downplay differences in perspective leads to students’ misperceptions regarding the sometimes-devastating consequences of differing perspectives (Barton & McCully, 2006; McCully, Pilgrim, Sutherland & McMin, 2002); Porat, 2004; Rüsen, 2004; Simon, 2006; Seixas, 2004).

Hughes, Bigler & Levy’s (2007) study of perspectives on race and Kolikant & Pollack’s (2007) study of perspective/identity on Israeli Jews’ and Israeli Arabs’ reading of historical texts suggest that even in divided societies, students’ initial misperceptions of others’ perspectives can sometimes be moderated with sensitive instruction. Similarly, instructional interventions can reduce students’ tendency to normalize or presentize past perspectives, imagining that people in the past shared a world view with people in the present or assuming that differences between past and present reflect ignorance on the part of historical actors (Barton, 1996; Levstik, Henderson & Lee; 2014; VanSledright, 2001). Nonetheless, when historical study presents challenges to students’
historical attachments, it can be extremely difficult to engage students in productive discussion or ask them to analyze the bases for divergent views (Barton & McCully, 2005; Levstik, 2001; McCully, et al., 2002).

Not surprisingly, given the findings above, students of all ages struggle with the complexity of historical interpretation and narration. Sometimes they struggle because they lack deep content knowledge (Colley, 2015). In other cases, students simplify, conflate, reorganize, or invent historical details to maintain narrative cohesion, flattening perspectives, emphasizing the actions of dominant groups and individuals, overgeneralizing from specific instances to entire groups, and ignoring marginalized or minority perspectives (Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001; Barca, Castro & Amaral, 2010; Monte-Sano, 2011; Schweber, 2008; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat & Duncan, 2009; VanSledright, 2002). When instruction focuses on building analytical skills, however, students are more likely to draw on historical sources to identify and account for within and across-group differences as well as differences between past and present. Further, they are more likely to identify and account for differential historical agency in their historical narratives (Monte-Sano, 2011).

**CONSTRAINTS ON STUDENT LEARNING**

As the research suggests, students can do challenging intellectual work in history, especially when they can focus on the impact of extraordinary historical events on ordinary peoples’ lives (Barton & McCully, 2005; Biddulph & Adey, 2004; Dimitriadis, 2000; Goldberg, 2013; Grant, 2001; Haydn & Harris, 2008; Kohlmeier, 2005; Kolbl & Straub, 2001; Levesque, 2003; Levstik & Groth, 2002; Schweber, 2009; Wills, 2005; VanSledright, 1997; Wineburg, 2000; Yeager & Terzian, 2007). Yet, in the United States, students tend to list history as one of their least favorite subjects while also doing poorly on national history assessments (NCES, 2010). Scholars have suggested a number of possible explanations for their performance, often focusing on constraints related to various literacies.

Initially, researchers focused on textbooks, finding that clearly voiced trade books and trade-book-like depictions of the past enhanced student comprehension (Beck, McKeown, & Worthy, 1995; Paxton, 1997; Smith & Niemi, 2001; VanSledright & Kelly, 1998). Several studies indicated that direct instruction in reading and writing strategies, especially for struggling readers, enhanced student learning (Monte-Sano, 2011; Nokes, 2012; Reisman, 2012). Direct instruction on strategies, however, had no impact on students’ ability to think historically unless instruction also focused on developing associations among relevant historical concepts (van Boxtel & van Drie, 2004).

More recently, attention has moved to analyzing visual media and material culture as historical sources (Levstik, Henderson & Lee, 2014; Marcus, Paxton & Meyerson, 2006; Prangsma, Van Boxtel, & Kanselaar, 2008; Stoddard, 2009; Swan & Hofer, 2013). Indeed, Desai, Hamlin & Mattson (2009) suggest that learning history might be “as much a visual question as it is a textual one” (p. 6). That students often draw on film for historical information without much critical assessment of what they are seeing makes researching this medium especially pressing (Marcus, Paxton & Meyerson, 2006; Wineburg et al., 2007). With practice in critically analyzing films, however, students can not only recognize different perspectives but consider the consequences of those perspectives (Maggioni, Alexander & VanSledright, 2004; Metzger & Suh, 2008; Marcus et al., 2006). Stoddard (2013), however, cautions that, because students tend
to see documentaries as more authoritative than popular films, they may miss political perspectives that might have been noticed in a different genre.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

History educators face a complex set of challenges: contested purposes, a broad pur-view (all of time and every place), often-fragmentary sources, complex cultural tools and cultural settings, and difficulties in helping students transfer what they’ve learned in class to life outside the classroom. That said, students are fairly consistent in their expectations for historical study. They expect to learn how the world got to be the way it is and they expect to use this knowledge to make more informed decisions in the present and future (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Rüsen, 2004; Seixas, 2004; VanSledright, 1997). Unfortunately, there is little evidence that traditional textbook-based history instruction achieves these goals. World History for Us All (Dunn, 2009) offers a promising if empirically untested alternative, a “unified chronology” that emphasizes global change and “patterns of historical meaning and significance” (n. p.). Among empirically tested approaches, problem-based instruction appears to help students recognize and account for perspectives that influence people’s civic, personal, and humanitarian actions (Saye & Brush, 2005). Perhaps the most promising findings, however, regard how amenable students’ historical misperceptions are to systematic instruction that is sensitive to social, cultural, and political identifications. In such classroom contexts, students learn to locate and evaluate increasingly complex historical sources in order to build evidence-based interpretations that differentiate among the types of agency available to historical actors (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Epstein, 2008; McCully et al., 2002; Wade, 2007). With more experience, older students also begin to contextualize historical perspectives and put the present in historical context (Rüsen, 2004). The reported fragility of these skills, however, argues for consistent reinforcement if historical study is ever to inform participatory citizenship and democratic humanism (Seixas, 2004; Barton & Levstik, 2004). Doing this well will also require persistent research attention.

FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the most serious gaps in history education research surrounds the emergence of historical thinking in the early primary years. Scholars in other fields have recognized the importance of investigating early learning, but this has been less the case in history education. The steep drop in instruction in social studies at the elementary level garnered some research attention, largely focused on the impact of integration with language arts, or the challenges teachers face in developing substantive instruction (James, 2008; Rock, Hefner, O’Conner et al., 2004). These are important investigations, but history education would also benefit from learning how current instructional patterns focusing on cultural universals influence emerging conceptions of the past. As Brophy & Alleman (2005) note, the fact that even the youngest students participate in these cultural patterns does not mean that their ideas and understandings are necessarily well articulated, but it does mean that they have enough experience to ask researchable questions.

A second gap exists in regard to how students learn about the world beyond the nation-state. How, for instance, might a global perspective alter (or fail to alter)
students’ ideas about the normalcy of other ways of living, about the impact of long-term global patterns or about historical connections across cultures (Dunn, 2009)? Further, how might such study influence the extent to which students empathize with people distant from them in time or place? How might a more global approach to history help students develop cosmopolitan as well as national and local identifications (Appiah, 2007)? And, finally, how do students learn to transfer any of what they learn about the past to decisions about what constitutes an evolving common good?

REFERENCES


Learning History • 125


McCully, A., Pilgrim, N., Sutherland, A., & McMinn, T. (2002). “Don’t worry, Mr. Trimble, we can handle it”: Balancing the rational and emotional in the teaching of contentious topics. Teaching History, 106, 6–12.


