On a recent day in April, I visited an Iowa school to observe a history lesson. The class I visited was in the third week of a six-week unit on industrialization. The students had studied various images, documents, and readings as they explored concepts of craftsmen and mass production, the motive for and impact of inventions on textile and steel production, and the experiences and relationships of laborers and managers in a changing work world.

Twenty-three students began the session on this day by reviewing their learning on the role of steel in industrialization. Their teacher began with a simple request: “Tell me about steel.” Student hands went up.

“It let us build skyscrapers.”

“Native Americans helped build them.”

“Mohawks!”

“It was made from iron.”

“At first craftsmen made it. It was expensive ‘cause it was hard to make and took a long time. When they figured out how to make it more like on an assembly line, it got cheaper and they made lots.”

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Possibilities of Pedagogy

The End of History Education in Elementary Schools?
The teacher at this point interrupted to ask what the original steel craftsmen were called. The class answered in unison, “Puddlers!” “Who was the man from England that invented the process to make steel more easily?” Again the class exclaimed in unison, “Sir Henry Bessemer!” What happened to the puddlers? More softly, “They lost their jobs.”

The teacher brought the discussion back to a steel brainstorm.

“It changed a lot of things because it was strong,” a student said.

What kinds of things?

“Railroad tracks.”

“Bridges.”

“Buildings.”

As the review wound down, the class shifted into a brief exploration of Andrew Carnegie. After reading an introductory biography they discussed Carnegie’s accomplishments, and then considered his labor practices.

“If he had so much money, why didn’t he pay his workers better?” one student asked.

“The new workers taking the strikers’ places is like what happened with Lowell and at the Triangle factory,” another chimed in.

“I bet the men that fought back got blacklisted.”

The class reached no conclusions about Carnegie’s legacy. The exploration wrapped up with everyone considering which aspects of steel production they had studied that week were generally positive and which were generally negative for society.

Who are these Iowa students? Third graders. Eight- and nine-year-old children of varying academic abilities; some read below the third-grade level, some read on grade level, and some above. They all have one thing in common, however; a rigorous immersion in history study during each of the past three years they have been in school.

Unfortunately, learning like this doesn’t happen in most U.S. elementary schools. Because the real but hidden story is that in this country, we systematically squander the years when our young are, by nature, history sponges. We ignore the opportunity to encourage historically literate, questioning minds. We neglect the chance to develop in children the habit to inform their understandings of the present with understandings of the past.

If historians find this litany of lost opportunities depressing, they may take comfort in the knowledge that they have considerable power to alter it. I would like to offer some suggestions (and some leading questions) for using that power to effect change in whether and how history is taught in elementary schools.

1. At the bedrock level, historians in higher education have the power to transform how they teach their own classes; the power to introduce students to history as a way of knowing instead of as a list of things to know. In a recent conversation with a historian, I expressed dismay that each year the students in my teaching history class arrive without reflexive historical analysis skills or even a concept of
history as being interpretive and evidence-based. His response was that he imagined many historians are not self-aware of the skills they use, and so do not teach them. I suggest a 25-page antidote for this condition: “On the Reading of Historical Texts” in Sam Wineburg’s *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*. Lendol Calder also offers us a brilliant, readable argument for a history survey that engages students in history as a way of encountering texts, *Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey*. For those seeking to design such a class, Calder provides a description of strategies.

2. Individual historians also have the power to embrace teacher education as part of their daily mission. If you are history faculty, do you identify the students in your classes that are seeking or plan to seek a teaching certificate? Have you established relationships with education faculty on your campus so you can collaborate to embed teaching-related assignments for the pre-service teachers in your classes? When you identify the “best and brightest” students in your classes, do you automatically steer them onto a PhD track, or do you encourage them to share their talent and expertise with young people in K–12 schools?

3. Collectively, does your department advocate for more extensive history course requirements for students in the elementary education program? Since elementary schools typically are not departmentalized by course topic, most elementary school teachers will teach social studies. It’s absurd to expect a teacher to provide a rich history learning experience for children based on a three-hour social studies methods course that gives a nodding glance to every social science. If we want our children to have a richer history learning experience, we need to enhance the education of their teachers.

To initiate discussion of these issues with other members of your department, you might begin by distributing Ed Ayers’s white paper on strategies historians could use to enhance teacher education. Ayers’s piece is available on the AHA web site at [www.historians.org/pubs/Free/historyteaching/index.htm](http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/historyteaching/index.htm). Arlene Diaz and other faculty from the University of Indiana also offer a thought-provoking starting place for departmental conversations in “The History Learning Project: A Department ‘Decodes’ its Students.”

Change will not come overnight, but if we all face with eyes wide open the gap between what children can learn and the opportunities we give them to learn, we may quickly develop a collective sense of urgency to change the status quo. If you are a historian involved in a Teaching American History grants program, you may have some power to influence the elementary school history landscape even more immediately and directly. If you seek involvement in project design, you may have the chance to inform the process by raising awareness of the elements unique to the K–5 milieu. Professional development programs for elementary school teachers should have a structure that is different from those of middle and high school programs, because they have different needs. As you design elementary school projects, take into account what is unique to elementary schools: teachers work in grade level teams; they must teach (and therefore prepare for) numerous subjects each day; they typically have expertise in reading and literacy strategies; they have skills designing constructivist activities for students; and they often have stringent curricular
requirements for the topics they must teach. But they have few history skills and rarely any experience designing history lessons of depth or breadth. It is important, therefore, to keep in mind the following points.

1. When recruiting teacher participants, target entire grade levels or, better yet, entire school buildings to participate, rather than individual teachers from random grades and buildings.

2. Conduct professional development events that strengthen and make use of teacher grade level collaborations and develop collaborations between the grades.

3. Provide units of instruction. Encourage teachers to adapt and enhance these lessons, but give them something to start with, something of good quality that will help teachers adopt an understanding of history as evidence based and interpretive, and then teach it that way.

4. To the extent reasonable and possible, align your grant program history topics with existing curricular requirements in your teacher participants’ schools. That said, I also caution you not to limit your history explorations by adhering to the mistaken yet prevalent notion that children in grades K–3 can only understand elements of their own lives or neighborhoods.

In the interest of providing just a bit more fuel to stoke the sense of urgency for change I mentioned before, I’d like to conclude with another snapshot from the classroom.

In a Washington, Iowa, school in 2004, 20 third-grade students sat crosslegged on the floor in a discussion. For several weeks, the students had studied African American history. Now near the conclusion of the unit of study, the teacher asked the students to think about prejudice today. Does it exist in this classroom? The students raised a chorus of “No!” The teacher tilted her head thoughtfully and said, “Hmm, I wonder. Just the other day a group of you came in very upset about an injustice during recess.” The girls in the semicircle cried out, “It was the boys! They wouldn’t let us play basketball.” Indignant, the boys bounced to their knees. “We said they could play with us!” Interrupting the ensuing outcry, one girl leaped to her feet, pointed to a timeline the students had constructed over the course of the unit, which charted the 15th Amendment, literacy tests and poll taxes, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and exclaimed, “It’s just like the voting thing! They say we can play but they won’t throw us the ball!”

Forgive me for using this young girl’s inspired metaphor in another context...but in this ninth year of a new century, we know children can and want to do history. Are we going to throw them the ball?

—Elise Fillpot is director of “Bringing History Home,” a Teaching American History grant-funded curriculum development project based in Iowa. She is currently a visiting assistant professor in the history department of the University of Iowa and in the university’s College of Education.

Notes

1. The observation took place on April 15, 2009, at Prairie Ridge School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.


*The print version contained a different, incorrect designation.*
Career Diversity Is Not New, But Let's Get It Right This •
— There are some things I admire here but one need only read the footnotes

Data Storytelling and Historical Knowledge
— A generation ago data storytelling was called

Holocaust Museum Project Engages Citizen Historians
— THIS is important work. Lest we #NeverForget

The Saint Who Sent the Jesuits Packing: A New •
— There is no such identity as an "African woman" in the 17th