

## **Developing Historical Empathy through Debate: An Action Research Study**

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### *Abstract*

*Historical empathy, also referred to as perspective taking, is an important skill for students to learn. Students need to have historical empathy in order to understand the complexity of how historians explain past events. Historical empathy, defined by Downey (1995), is the ability to recognize how the past was different from the present, to distinguish between multiple perspectives from the past, to explain the author's perspective, and to defend it with historical evidence. In this action research study, a teacher used historical debate to foster the development of perspective taking in her fifth-grade class. Through debate, students took on the perspectives of people from the past and gained a better understanding of past events. Debates increased students' understanding of historical contexts and differences between different viewpoints in the past, both important aspects of perspective taking. Students, however, had trouble demonstrating that the past is different from the present.*

### **Introduction**

Since Wineburg's (1991) influential study on the cognitive breach between high school students and professional historians, American social studies researchers have focused considerable attention on developing historical thinking in students. While this term has multiple meanings, a substantial body of research has centered on the historical empathy. Defined succinctly by Davis (2001) as "imagination restrained by evidence," the complexity of the

concept of historical empathy has developed considerably in light of empirical research (p. 4). Grant (2003) defines historical empathy as “the notion of understanding multiple perspectives on peoples’ actions and on historical events” and/or “a disposition to imagine other perspectives” (p. 58, 76). Barton and Levstik (2004) identify five elements of historical empathy (or perspective recognition), including an appreciation for a sense of otherness of historical actors, the shared normalcy of the past, the effects of historical context, the multiplicity of historical perspectives, and the application of these elements to the context of the present (pp. 210-221). While distinguishing between cognitive empathy and affective empathy, as others have done, Barton and Levstik suggest that both are equally important. Downey (1995) employed similar, but slightly simpler, criteria for historical empathy, defined as the ability to recognize how the past was different from the present, distinguish between multiple perspectives from the past, explain their analysis of the author’s perspective, and defend it with historical evidence. I chose to use Downey’s definition as the basis for my study because these categories describe factors of historical empathy clearly and succinctly. I was able to elaborate on the categories and create a rubric to evaluate my students more objectively.

The term historical empathy might evoke thoughts of human emotion and feelings. The true meaning of historical empathy is not, however, judging historical people, based on contemporary ideals. Students must understand why a historical person acted the way he or she did, based on the culture of the time period being studied. Yeager, Foster, and Maley (1998) studied whether using a textbook or using a variety of primary and secondary sources better allowed students to develop historical empathy. They found that the students with more sources were able to synthesize the data more completely, and the students created their own evaluations of the material instead of regurgitating one author’s ideas. Therefore, the ability to perspective take is a cognitive skill that must be taught and practiced, not a show of human emotion. While focusing solely on the cognitive aspects of empathy, my study investigated whether using structured debates in a fifth-grade classroom developed historical empathy in the students.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

Research on perspective taking in upper elementary grades is fairly new. Most of the research has taken place in high schools; although there are studies which demonstrate that fifth graders are also capable of undertaking the historical process. This process involves reading primary and secondary sources in addition to using evidence to support the best estimation as to what happened. In a 2002 study, VanSledright taught 23 fifth-grade students the process of using primary and secondary sources to investigate the past. Through inquiry-based activities and two performance assessments, he found that as a result of his explicit teaching of how to *do history*, students were able to gain a better understanding of the historical process, resulting in cognitive growth in their epistemology of text. In order to accomplish this change, VanSledright found that it was necessary for students to have a strong grasp of historical information before asking them to take on a specific perspective. In earlier studies, Dulberg (2002) and Downey (1995) found that students across a range of ability levels, including English language learners, were able to take on historical perspectives in the upper elementary grades. Dulberg stressed the importance of not comparing the ability of children and adults to take on different historical perspectives. Dulberg and Downey agreed that children, who are still cognitively developing, need to engage in historical thinking while making connections to self as aligned to the constructivist theory.

They must also be given ample opportunity to practice perspective taking before they reach their potential (Dulberg, 2002, p. 31).

Although some research has been done on the benefits of using class discussion to develop historical empathy (Gall & Gall, 1990; Larson, 1997), little has been done on the use of debate to foster the development of historical empathy. Several teachers have written anecdotal articles about the use of historical debates in their classroom (Evans, 1993; Musselman, 2004). These articles, although helpful, do not provide strong evidence that debate is a technique that should be employed in social studies classrooms. Recently, Kohlmeier (2006) investigated the ties between class discussion and the development of historical empathy. Although her study was conducted on high school students, her results are applicable to this study. She found that when students shared their interpretations of historical events, discussion and debate allowed them to deepen understanding through the sharing of ideas in public discussion (Kohlmeier, 2006, p. 52). In her study, Kohlmeier employed Downey's four elements of historical empathy in the analysis of her results. My study also uses Downey's definition and analytic framework.

My study builds upon the practitioner research of VanSledright (2002) and Kohlmeier (2006) in that focus was upon developing deeper levels of historical understanding in students through primary source evidence. However, VanSledright's study focused upon the critical literacy skills by moving students along a continuum from "general practice reading" skills to "history-specific expertise" (p. 112). Kohlmeier used Socratic Seminars to engage students in communal inquiry around selected texts. My study focused on using structured debates on issues facing historical actors, offering another possible route to developing historical empathy in the classroom.

### ***Method and Setting***

This study reports the findings from an action research project conducted in the spring of 2007, during my teaching experience.<sup>1</sup> Erickson (1986) argues that the reality of teaching is not "out there" to be discovered; instead, practitioners construct their own realities. Their actions are shaped and guided by their own meaning perspectives. Action research is practitioner-based. McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (2003) suggest that action research "recognizes knowledge not only as an outcome of cognitive activity, but also as embodied; that is, mind and body are not perceived as separate entities but integrated.... knowledge exists as much 'in here' as 'out there.'" (p. 17). The objective of action research is to capture the process of how the act of teaching evolves in response to the perceived reality of the practitioner(s) in a particular context. Therefore, my interpretation of results will be revealed throughout the essay wherein description of the project will be interspersed with analysis. The findings are not meant to be generalizable but simply to suggest the possible as presented through and reflected upon by the meaning perspectives of the action researcher.

This study examines a fifth-grade classroom of 18 students, located in a suburban school in northeastern Virginia. Nine of the students are white, and nine are nonwhite. Four students in this class qualified for free or reduced lunch. Six students in this class have Individualized Educational Plans (IEPS) with disabilities ranging from learning disabilities to emotional disturbances.

The curriculum the fifth graders debated involves westward expansion in the United States between 1801 and 1861. Eight 90-minute class periods were dedicated to learning background information about westward expansion. The study focused on the historical context

of the events, such as the geographic and economic factors that contributed to the move west including population growth, cheap fertile land, availability of gold, efficient transportation, and ideas like Manifest Destiny.

Currently, in the Commonwealth of Virginia, all elementary students are tested for the cumulative acquisition of historical content knowledge via multiple-choice tests in the third, fourth, and fifth grades.<sup>ii</sup> With additional testing during these particular years in mathematics, writing, reading, and science, Virginia elementary school teachers are left with little room for curricular experimentation and flexibility (Fore, 1998). For most teachers, the content of social studies is largely dictated by the fact-based, standardized curriculum. As a result, I needed to follow the curriculum framework designed by the county and Commonwealth when designing and implementing this study. While covering the requisite background information, I also attempted to get students thinking about different groups involved in the Westward expansion and how each group experienced these events. My action research focused on the question: How does classroom debate help to develop historical empathy in fifth-grade students?

Data were collected in three ways. First, I kept anecdotal notes that traced the evolution of my meaning perspective in response to my interaction with the students and curriculum. Second, I designed, distributed, and collected teacher-made debate guides. The purpose of these guides was to help students structure their research and organize their speeches for the debates. The guides instructed them to list three major reasons why their side was correct, and then they were asked to think about the points their opponents might use. What would their responses be when those arguments were made? There was also space for students to prepare questions they might want to ask during the question-and-answer portion. In order to complete these debate guides, the students had to think like their assigned perspective, even if they disagreed with it. At some points, students had trouble separating their own views from those of people in the past. One example, which includes a student in my class who was called a racist by others in her group, will be discussed later. My final piece of data was a videotape of the student debates which was analyzed for evidence of historical empathy.

I assessed students' historical empathy in four ways as defined by Downey (1995) and used by Kohlmeier (2006). Scores were based on students' demonstration of their understanding of the following: (a) the past is different from the present; (b) there are various perspectives from the past; (c) understanding of the context under which events took place, and (d) the information used for debate must be based on historical evidence. While Kohlmeier's study attributed Downey's elements of historical empathy to different students on an either/or basis (i.e., students either demonstrated that element or not), I further developed Downey's code to a schematic continuum that contained three levels of understanding for each element of historical empathy (see Appendix A). These categories, which emerged from the data, were developed after the study was conducted in light of Downey's research.

### *The Westward Expansion Unit*

After covering basic information about the time period, I studied the events from a specific perspective. I began by reading a primary source document from a person in that group (a woman who moves west, a Native American who is being forced off the land, or a pioneer who discovers gold), and as a class, we discussed what this person's life was like. What did they see, what did they do, and why did they make the choices they made? Through this person's

perspective, students learned about geographic, social, and economic factors that affected Americans' lives.

For the debate, students were placed into heterogeneous groups of three, based on their classroom achievement. Generally, each group had one student from each high, medium, and low ability level. Each group was assigned a side to debate. The debates were conducted in a generic debate format. First, the affirmative side gave a speech, laying out their major arguments, and then the negative side gave its own speech. After both sides had spoken, the affirmative side was given approximately five minutes to question the negative side and the negative side questioned the affirmative side. The goals of the cross questioning portion of the debate are threefold. First, the negative side pointed out weaknesses in the affirmative side's arguments. Second, they wanted to clarify unclear points, and third, their goal was to prepare room for argumentation. After the questioning, 30-second closing arguments were given by each side, with the affirmative side going first.

The students were assigned a perspective to debate from, once in their groups. The first debate attempted to decide if life was harder for women who lived in the East or the West during the period of westward expansion. Another group took on the perspective of a family which was trying to decide whether or not to move west. One side argued that they should move west; the other side argued that the dangers outweighed the benefits, and the family should not move west. The final debate consisted of a group of students taking the perspective of Native Americans and a group taking the perspective of White settlers. These two groups debated if the land truly belonged to the Native Americans or the settlers.

Speeches were written well in advance of the actual debates, and facts could be checked with teachers or research materials. The researcher and para-educator (classroom aide) for the classroom were also on hand to discuss speeches with students. Many of the speeches were merely a list of facts without much interpretation. Some speeches lacked basis in context. They did not show understanding of the historical context or exhibit an understanding of the experiences of the people of the past. For these reasons, speeches did not give an accurate reflection of student development of historical empathy. The question-and-answer sections of the debates gave a more accurate picture of what the students actually learned. The students came up with possible questions to use before the debates, but they were able to change or add questions as the debate took place. Their answers to the questions were unpracticed; therefore providing me with a better understanding of the student's thinking.

I chose to have the students debate rather than hold whole class discussions because I thought that would prevent more outspoken students from dominating. Each student would have an equal opportunity to participate. The students wrote the speeches in their groups and then split it up into parts, so each student participated in the speech section of the debate. Most of the data for the study, however, came from the question-and-answer-section. The students of higher ability levels and more outspoken students participated more in these sections; therefore I was only able to analyze the thinking of 11 of the 18 students. Most of these students fit into the high or medium level of ability. The information in the rest of the results section is based on the responses of those 11 students, as watched on the video recordings.

### *Are Fifth Graders Capable of Perspective Taking?*

Overall, fifth graders are capable of taking on different historical perspectives. All students achieved a score of level two or above in three out of four categories (see Table 1). All

but two students achieved a score of level two or higher on all categories. Although these skills are still in the developmental stages, with further opportunity to practice the use of these concepts, most of the students in the class will be able to reach these high levels. Even though 7 of the 18 students could not be analyzed because they were not vocal during the debates, I believe that they have the ability to perspective take but did not show it in this exercise.

**Table 1**

*Levels of Student Achievement*

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Past is Different from the Present	2	3	6
Various Perspectives in the Past	0	6	5
Context of Past Events Understood	0	0	11
Use of Historical Evidence	0	11	0

The only aspect of perspective taking of which some students were unable to move beyond level one was demonstrating understanding that the past is different from the present. I was not surprised at this result because even adult historians must account for their own perspective and bias when studying events of the past. As I mentioned before, it was difficult to analyze their speeches because students could practice their speeches for teachers and check their facts. Misunderstanding of this aspect of perspective taking could be seen, however, in their speeches.

On day nine of the unit, when students were writing their speeches in groups, an example of the students' confusion was shown. This group was debating whether land truly belonged to the Native Americans who lived there or a group of White settlers who had recently moved onto the land. This group was taking on the perspective of the settlers. One member of the group, a female, suggested writing about Native Americans being dirty and uncivilized. This statement was completely acceptable in this assignment because she was thinking like a White settler of this time period. It demonstrated that she understood cultural beliefs of the time and appropriately applied them. The other students in her group were appalled and told me that this girl was a racist. The female student was understandably upset about the situation, so we talked about it in her group. The next day, before I allowed them to continue working on their speeches, we discussed the perspectives of the Whites living at this time. What were some stereotypes held about Native Americans? Why do you think these stereotypes existed? I explained that we were trying to understand how people in the past thought and asked the class how they thought we could do that. We had a sophisticated discussion on stereotypes (both past and present) and ways we could practice thinking like people in the past. I attempted to have the students reach an

understanding that people of the past had different ideas about other groups of people. It was not that these people were mean or stupid, they just thought differently than people of today.

At the completion of this study, I found that two students fell into the category of level one; three students were in level two and six students in level three, when establishing that the past is different from the present. Other statements demonstrated this type of misunderstanding. One group was debating as a tribe of Native Americans who were arguing the point that they should be allowed to stay on their traditional land and that they did not want to move west. They said, "People might make fun of us because we dance weird."

This was most likely not a foremost concern of Native Americans being forced off of their land. Instead, it is an interpretation of a problem as seen through the eyes of a fifth grader. Although Native Americans might have also been worried about moving to a new place and how they would be accepted by people who already lived there, I felt that this group was missing several more important aspects of the forced move. This might have been a valid point if it was part of a larger argument about self consciousness anyone would feel moving to a new location. This comment, however, cannot stand alone as a valid argument. Both of the students who remained at level one were in this group.

A student who reached level three was explaining why the land did not belong to Native Americans said, "You just follow the buffalos and you don't even use the land right. You don't deserve the land." This student was explaining the White settler's view that since several Native American tribes did not farm the land but were nomadic, they did not need the land as much as White farmers did. This statement showed the student's consideration of settlers' lack of understanding of Native American culture. This was a historical view that shows differences between the past and the present.

When studying whether students could demonstrate that they understood that there were various perspectives in the past, six students fell into the level two category and five students fell into the level three category. I attribute the students' success in this category to the way the class studied the different perspectives. Since we studied westward expansion from several different perspectives, students were aware that people had different experiences in relation to the events.

When I was analyzing the debates, I gave students credit for understanding that there were various perspectives in the past when they pointed out differences between the perspectives they were assigned and the one they were debating against. Many students did this in their questions or in their debate guide where I specifically asked them what points their opponents might make and how they planned to respond to those points. Since all the students had notes from all of the perspectives, most students did not lose points from this aspect of perspective taking. Students who were placed on level two only listed facts about the other side such as "Whites think they own land" or "[Women in the East] do work inside the house." These groups showed some understanding of the other group's perspective in the debates but not consistently.

Students who referenced groups of people the class did not study specifically were also given credit for understanding that there were various perspectives in the past. With the recent push for multicultural education, teachers have come to realize the importance of learning about the lives of people other than the more traditional, Anglo-Saxon focused history usually taught in today's schools. Although the class focused on the perspective of White women in the West, students were given research materials that focused on the lives of African-American women. One student in particular, an African-American female, chose to focus her portion of the speech on the lives of African-American women in the West. The students in this group were given a

score of level three for comparing the lives of White and African-American women in the West within their debate.

A student who did not demonstrate an understanding that there were various perspectives in the past made the statement, “Everyone believes in Manifest Destiny; it’s our duty and our right.” Although this student grasped the meaning of the term Manifest Destiny, it was not true that everyone believed in it. This student was taking on the perspective of a White settler debating against Native Americans over about whom the land truly belonged. It certainly was not the belief of the Native Americans he was debating against that it was the duty of the Whites to take over the Native American land.

The third aspect of historical perspective is the student must demonstrate understanding of the context in which events took place. I placed all 11 students into level three for this category. The reason the students were so successful with this concept is we spent about eight class periods on westward expansion before we began the debates. In addition to the time we spent in social studies, the stories we read in the reading textbook also had to do with westward expansion. This gave the class even more time to talk about the perspective of the narrator of these stories. Students were able to connect the information they learned in social studies and reading.

Much of the material I used to assess their understanding was basically fact recall. This is not an aspect for which higher level thinking is needed. As long as they could apply the facts they learned to their perspective, they could score fairly high in this aspect. The research of VanSledright (2002), for developing historical empathy in students, stresses the importance of having a strong foundation of knowledge about the events, before asking students to take on perspectives. In class, I did this by holding class discussions, taking notes, and doing projects about the movement westward for about two weeks before moving into the debates. I felt that as long as the students applied the facts we learned correctly to their perspective, they were on level three.

In one debate, a family was arguing over whether or not they should make the trip out west. One female student was asked, “But if you go west, you could get gold and be rich. Why wouldn’t you want to do that?” She replied, “We don’t even know if we’ll get out west. It’s not worth it.” She went on to discuss the possibility of contracting a disease, being attacked by Native Americans, and enduring starvation and injury on the trail. This student displayed her understanding of the facts, based on her assigned perspective. She knew the dangers of moving out west and was able to argue that the trip was “not worth it.”

Another student gave an accurate explanation of what life was like for runaway slaves in the West. He said, “Black women still had the risk of being captured. Imagine running away every time you see a White person.” Although runaway slaves did not literally have to run when they saw a White person, this student understood the dangers runaway slaves faced. Again, this student was able to take facts he had learned—some slaves who ran to the West were captured and sent back into bondage—and apply it to his assigned perspective. He explains the fear that runaway slaves must have felt living in the West.

The final aspect of perspective taking I will discuss is that information must be based on historical evidence. Originally, I was going to ask the students to cite their sources specifically in their speeches. When I got to know the class and their abilities, I found that fifth graders are still learning how to gather research information on their own. Following a suggestion from my cooperating teacher, I did not insist that students use citations. They were only required to be able to show me where their information came from, if I should have a question. I placed all 11

students in level 2 in this category. I found that when students did not have evidence to support a claim, they would simply make up facts. An example of this came from a speech that tried to convince us that life for Black female slaves in the East was difficult. A student said, "It was hard to escape; at least 30% of 50 people who tried to escape were whipped or just killed." When asked about this statistic, the student who said it could not offer any kind of explanation about its origin. Another speech discussed the probability of contracting rabies in the West. These statements are examples of students being unsure of information; instead of looking it up or using information from their notes, they filled in the gaps with their own ideas. Several students did very well with researching and asking questions, but not one debate was free of historical inaccuracies.

### ***How Does Classroom Debate Help Foster the Development of Historical Empathy in Fifth-Grade Students?***

Assigning students one specific perspective to learn about and become experts on allowed them to delve further into the project than if I had assessed them through a paper and pencil test. They were able to practice taking on different perspectives through other class assignments, and when it finally came time to do the debates, they knew what to do.

This class was extremely argumentative, outspoken, and excited about this project. They wanted to share their ideas and argue with their friends. If this class was not so outspoken, I do not think the end result would have been as successful. My students wanted to share exactly what they thought, and if they disagreed with a point made, they were vocal about it. That was great for the action researcher, because I got a clear picture of their thoughts and understandings. This process of discussion and debate led to some very adult discussions about differences between perspectives, both contemporary and historical.

My students needed much teacher assistance, especially when they began. I was constantly reminding them, "Is that something someone in the past would think or feel? What would you do if you were in that position? What would you think if you lived then?" If this class was not so willing to participate and share their ideas, I do not think they would have been as successful. With proper support and a class willing to take risks, debates can be successful in any fifth-grade classroom.

### ***Discussion and Teaching Implications***

The first problem I found when analyzing my data was that I could not fully assess the work of seven students because their only involvement in the debates was the speech. I found it was easiest to assess students' thinking during the question-and-answer section when what they were saying was not rehearsed. I think this problem could have been eliminated if the groups did not have students of such varying ability levels. Almost every group had one student of a low, medium, and high ability level. Students of high and medium ability levels often dominated the debates. This problem might have been solved by grouping students by ability level. Perhaps putting medium students with low students and allowing them to debate against other students of similar ability levels would have allowed those students to take charge and become more involved. As an action researcher and a teacher, I might have been able to better assess their thinking if they were grouped in this manner. Grouping higher-level students to debate against each other might have allowed them to go even further with their perspective taking skills.

Students who were more outspoken and confident were those who were also more likely to share their ideas. I think if we were to do the debates again with the same class, more students would be willing to speak up. The newness of the activity, as well as the anxiety of speaking in front of classmates and a camera, might have frightened several students.

Of the 11 students I could assess, 3 had an individualized education plan (IEP) or some kind of special need. There are six students in the class with an IEP, so about half of them participated in the study. That also means that about half of the students who could not be assessed (three students out of seven could not be assessed) had special needs. The students who were the most successful with the debates were students who perform well in school and those confident in their abilities. Those that were willing to take risks were the ones who did most of the talking and were the most successful. Students who normally did not participate in class and were not willing to take risks did not talk. One way to fix this problem is to allow students to pick whether they will be speech writers or ask and answer questions. Students who do not feel comfortable speaking in front of the class will have the option to research and write speeches ahead of time. Those who do feel comfortable will also have to be familiar with the information, because they would have to ask and answer questions. Once again, practicing further debates may have allowed normally quiet students to become more comfortable with speaking in front of the class.

I found debate to be a great activity for fifth graders. It is developmentally appropriate and at least for my outspoken class, something they truly enjoyed. Most students enjoyed sharing their ideas and arguing with others. It also allowed them to practice life skills, such as expressing their opinions and examining ideas from several perspectives. As a teacher, it allowed me to see where misunderstandings lie, so that I could go back and re-teach. Misunderstandings which might not have come up under normal circumstances were revealed. I recommend the use of historical debates in a fifth-grade classroom to help students develop their perspective taking skills.

## Appendix A

## Three Levels of Understanding for Each Element of Historical Empathy

Category	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<b>Student demonstrated understanding that the past is different from the present.</b>	Student gave modern explanations of events or talked about modern technology or modern beliefs in relation to the past.	Student used some modern and some historical explanations of events in the past. Student did not talk about modern technology or beliefs when speaking about the past.	Student gave logical, historical explanations of events in the past. Student did not talk about modern technology or modern beliefs when speaking about the past.
<b>Student demonstrated understanding that there were various perspectives in the past.</b>	Student did not identify any historical perspective. Student did not show understanding of any historical viewpoint.	Student did not identify differences between their side and the side they were debating against. Student only showed understanding of the view point they were assigned.	Student identified differences between his or her side and the side he or she was debating against. Student demonstrated understanding of the viewpoint he or she was assigned as well as other historical viewpoints.
<b>Student demonstrated understanding of the context in which events took place.</b>	Did not accurately describe feelings or beliefs of the viewpoint they were assigned.	Described accurately the feelings and beliefs of the viewpoint he or she was assigned some of the time.	Student consistently described accurately the feelings and beliefs of the viewpoint he or she was assigned.
<b>Information student used is based on historical evidence.</b>	Student was not able to identify source of information. Information was not historically accurate.	Student was not able to identify source of information. Information given was mostly historically accurate.	Student was able to identify source of information. Information was historically accurate.

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<sup>ii</sup> This is the testing scheme of the specific school in this study. Some Virginia school districts have a slightly different testing regiment; although by graduation, all Virginia students have taken the same tests.