

Amherst School, Buffalo County, Nebraska, 1907.
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Identifying with Ancestors: Tracking the History of America

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THIS ARTICLE BRIEFLY DESCRIBES A PROJECT that can enable teachers to draw their fourth or fifth grade students into the very essence of American history. The past gathers meaning for the children as they explore their own particular ancestry through the use of genealogical research. Students and teacher construct a timeline of American history, on which they insert entries for events in the lives of students' families. This timeline invites young students to see the threads of their own lives, and family members' lives, as part of the historical fabric of their country. As the project unfolds, students arrive at an objective, yet personal understanding of the variations in ethnicity surrounding them and in experiences that make up American history. Finally, children can begin to discover that they

are not isolated entities with no roots and no connections, but historical and cultural beings with a rich and complex heritage.

Learning Goals

Through the various exercises of this project, students should:

- gain a chronological understanding of major events in the history of America;
- memorize some geographical facts and gain experience using a map;
- develop some basic research skills and gain an understanding of historical research, oral history, personal history, historical interpretation, and genealogy;

- begin to identify with past generations by seeing how the beliefs and values that structure their own lives have come down to them through the generations;
- experience a growing sense of responsibility toward their peers, older adults, the nation, and all its people.

We usually spend about 90 days on this project in our fourth grade classroom, but it could be extended if time and curriculum permit it.

1. Biographies of My Family Members

As their first project, students write short biographies of their parent(s) or guardian(s).¹ Students first provide parents with a letter describing this project. The letter also asks if it is okay for children to interview adults in the family and for the resulting biographies to be discussed in class.² Encourage students to ask their parents to discuss where, when, how, and why questions about their own lives. If grandparents are nearby or reachable by phone, they too can read the letter to parents and be interviewed.

Back in the classroom, students can discuss these biographies in small groups, and later with the whole class. Encourage children to point out any commonalities in the biographies, as well as the uniqueness of each life. Conclude the discussion by introducing the idea of studying the lives of grandparents, great grandparents, and more distant ancestors.

2. Family Ancestors

Now we broadened our view to explore the lives of deceased family members. Who were the people who lived before us? What did they look like? What were their lives like? What did they do for work and play? What did they believe in? What challenges did they face?

Instruct children on very basic skills of genealogical research, such as how to draw simple family trees, indicating relationships such as marriage and offspring. Several good books are available on the topic of introducing genealogy to children (see suggested resources). Students can interview older members of the family, collect photographs and artifacts, and explore the genealogical resources at the local public library. (For safety, no valuable or irreplaceable original documents should be brought to school, only copies.) The more that parents can participate in this project, the better, since they will be providing much of the “raw data” for the research.

The great majority of parents are happy to provide some family information to their children for this project. If a child is adopted, discuss this project with parents before the project begins. It has been my experience that such children usually look at the genealogy of their adoptive family. A very few parents may be uncomfortable having their child discuss family history. In these cases, children can research the past of a prominent historical figure of their liking.

The ethnic origins of many Americans are complex, and an overload of available information must be avoided with these young students. With the help of the family, choices can be made. I have observed that children often choose to research the side of the family that has been in America the longest, has the most documentation, or has (according to the child) most influenced that



student. Ambitious students may undertake the complicated task of researching both parental lineages.

3. A Map of the World

Reserve one wall of the classroom for the parallel time-line and, to the left of it, a map of the world. Students make both of these resources. The map can be a homolographic projection³ of the world showing each continent with a different color. (We use Montessori colors.)

Place a small (1x1 inch) photograph of each child on his or her family’s country of origin. Write the student’s name, country origin, and year of first ancestor’s arrival to America (if that information is available) under the photograph.

Have students place a string or strand of yarn from the photo at their ancestral country of origin to the approximate location of your community on the map. Native American students can be invited to place a star on the original territory of their tribe, which might, of course, be right where you are.

Look at the resulting assembly of strands on the map. Do students perceive any pattern? Do many of the strands or stars originate from the same location, or does your classroom map resemble a web? What is the ethnic diversity of your community? Children can perceive how their lives weave naturally into a pattern that was begun long ago.

4. Country-of-Origin Profiles

If the curriculum at your school calls for an introductory study of countries and cultures, the map and web can lead into those themes. Students can look at the countries of origin according to geography and resources, history and economies, and people and culture. Native American children can study these same topics with regard to their tribe. Why did people leave their countries of origins? What was happening in their home countries at the time that they left? Assign students to write short profiles of these places of origin and times of departure. Students can begin to understand that the patterns of their lives are drawn in part from the lives of people who lived long ago, often in places far away.

5. Photographs and Timelines

The timeline itself is best made with three or four large, white poster boards, laid horizontally end-to-end along one wall. I make a line along the top of the boards with one-inch-wide blue tape, as blue seems not to interfere with the materials and documents attached to the boards. The line is best placed at the students' eye level, so that they may reach to the top of the workspace (the top of the poster boards).

Students can place a second copy of their (1x1 inch) photographs above the time-line at their family's date of arrival to America. They place photos of relatives and ancestors, along with family documents, beneath their photos (All of these items are photocopies; I ask students not to risk bringing valuable or original documents to school.) In our classrooms in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the photographs cluster at certain dates, some around the early 1700s, but mostly around the 1800s and early 1900s. As one moves back in time towards the 1600s, the photographs taper off until only those of Native American children are present. The date of their ancestors' arrival can be indicated by a break at the beginning of the line that is marked "20,000 years before the present."

Below the timeline, students place historical images and primary documents copied from trade books and textbooks, each labeled with a caption and date. The images of America's past then appear amid the story of the lives of their own ancestors, the architects of our country today. Students start to note common linkages and points of interests. As these are explored, the history of America comes to life. Themes appear: the Bill of Rights and the American Constitution, the Trail of Tears, the liberation of slaves, and the rights of women. A common point of interest in our Michigan classrooms is the advent of "lumberjacks." We observe that many families followed the same trail to Michigan, coming either from Pennsylvania or from Canada along the St. Lawrence River.

The Classroom Experience

It is difficult to predict how the project develops in a specific year, since it depends in part on what students discover and contribute. As students work on this project, the general mood is usually one of interest and joy. Working in small groups brings the children closer, but more so the sharing of their lives and family histories. Interests have grown, and questions are openly discussed.

The most important aspect of this project is that genealogy opens avenues for group exploration. The beauty and some of the blemishes of history are open for examination. In our classrooms, children see common elements emerge: most families were farm families when they first arrived; English and Dutch went west

from Pennsylvania; the French (who were Huguenot) came down the St. Lawrence River and settled in Michigan. Several African American students in our classrooms can report ancestors arriving more than 200 years ago. Documents are compared: papers from Ellis Island, the names of the boats of arrival, birth, marriage, wills, death certificates. Indigenous children may find a grandparent who is a "rememberer."

Some students realized that their ancestors were in the same wars together: U.S. government rosters of Union and Confederate soldiers and other records of that era listed ancestors who were enlisted, wounded, or decorated. The students feel pride for those who came before them.

Conclusion

The finished class timeline links two strands of America's story: landmark national events and the lives of students' parents and ancestors. In classrooms where we have done this project, each year's timeline is slightly different from the previous year's work.

By the conclusion of the timeline, students have practiced skills of historical research, learned important facts about national history, and glimpsed at the variety of life experiences represented right in the classroom. Ultimately, the children will arrive at an objective yet personal understanding of history, culture, and society. They will discover themselves to be both historical and cultural beings. 📖

Notes

1. The involvement of parents in their children's education is strongly associated with the student's achievement; Eugenia Hepworth Berger, *Parents as Partners* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000): 135-187.
2. We do not use any sort of official permission/privacy waiver form for this purpose. The teacher's letter to parents serves primarily to give them a heads-up: "Prepare to be interviewed by your history student! What you say may be repeated in class! And, oh yes, have fun with this!"
3. National Geographic Society, Map #22003.

Suggested Teaching Resources

- M. Gail Hickey, *Bringing History Home: Local and Family History Projects for Grades K-6* (New York: Pearson, Allyn & Bacon, 1998).
- Joan Sweeney, *Me and My Family Tree* (New York: Bt Bound, 2000).
- Maureen Taylor, *Through the Eyes of Your Ancestors: A Step-by-Step Guide to Uncovering your Family's History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).
- Ira Wolfman, *Do People Grow on Family Trees? Genealogy for Kids and Other Beginners* (New York: Workman, 1991).

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