

Veterans Day Then and Now: First Graders Learn from Primary Sources and Take Action

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Introducing patriotic holidays such as Veterans Day with historical photographs and other primary sources in classrooms can not only spark children’s interest, but also promote critical thinking and historical comprehension.¹ Meaningful, hands-on historical lessons can also motivate children to take informed action about issues they care about.

We begin this article with a brief history of Veterans Day, followed by a description of two lessons in which first grade teacher and co-author Lisa May used historical photographs to introduce students to Veterans Day. Next, we describe a student-directed school-wide Veterans Day program that resulted from lessons that involved students in the analysis of primary sources.

History of Veterans Day

In the United States, the holiday now known as Veterans Day was originally called “Armistice Day.” In 1919, one year after Germany’s surrender to the Allies, President Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation and announced,

The reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country’s service, and with gratitude for the victory both because of the thing from which it has freed us, and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of nations. (*The Evening World*, 1919).

By 1926, twenty-seven of the then 48 states were already celebrating Armistice Day every November 11. Armistice Day became a legal national holiday in May 1938 by an act of Congress.² The holiday’s name was changed to Veterans Day in 1954 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower during his first term in office.³

Veterans Day in the United States has historically been celebrated with parades, moments of silence, and memorial services. Additionally, U.S. presidents and other dignitar-

ies typically attend a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Veterans Day (November 11) and Memorial Day (the last Monday in May) at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

Teaching About Veterans with Primary Sources

Lisa teaches first grade at Starpoint School, a small lab school of about 60 students in Fort Worth, Texas.⁴ Using a primary source analysis handout from the Library of Congress,⁵ she invites students to make observations about images and documents, reflect on their observations, and ask questions about what they see and what they wonder.⁶ The process of observing, reflecting, and questioning is not necessarily linear; by asking questions, teachers can expect children to respond to any of these prompts at any time.

The two lessons we describe in this article are connected to *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies Standards* theme ● **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**, as well as the National Standards for History concept of “historical thinking.”⁷ Specifically, Lesson 1 included attention to the notion of continuity in that children examined photographs of veterans from the past and present, and used data from the photographs to define the term “veteran.” Lesson 2 involved first graders engaging in historical comprehension as they examined visual data about how Veterans Day has been celebrated in the past.

Additionally, primary source analysis involved in these lessons and the culminating school-wide Veterans Day program are aligned to the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework*.⁸ Both lessons engage first graders in the process of using evidence from photographs to answer the questions, “What is a veteran?” and “How have people celebrated Veterans Day?” Thus, the lessons are connected to Dimension 3 of the C3 Framework: “Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence.” After learning about Veterans Day, the students organized a school-wide Veterans Day program to raise awareness about the significance of this national holiday. As such, the program connected to Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework: “Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.”



U.S. Army African American infantry marching in France, 1918

Lesson 1: What is a Veteran?

A military veteran, according to the American War Library's definition, is "any person who has served for any length of time in any military service branch."⁹ By the end of this 45-minute lesson, we wanted the first graders to be able to describe what it means to be a military veteran based on observations of historical and contemporary photographs depicting active and retired members of the armed forces. (Sidebar, page 30)

Lisa introduced the lesson by explaining to the first graders that they would be looking closely at some photographs of "special" people called "veterans." She asked students, who were sitting at tables in small groups, to imagine they were detectives looking for "clues" in the photos to answer the question, "What does it mean to be a veteran?" Student tables were close enough to the large white board so that everyone could see; however, students were invited to sit in right front of the board for a closer look if needed.

Using an interactive digital white board, Lisa displayed a black-and-white photo of African American U.S. Army troops marching in France during World War I in 1918. Students looked closely at the image as Lisa invited them to study what they were seeing, and to think about who the people in the photograph might be. Lisa then called on volunteers, one at a time, to step up to the white board and identify something they observed in the photograph that might be a clue about what it means to be a veteran. Students used the white board tools to circle their clues as they explained their thinking. Lisa

recorded their ideas on chart paper. Documenting children's ideas—by taking notes, or circling "clues" on copies of primary sources—can help students synthesize new information as they learn about a topic. After a few minutes, the chart included the following clues about characteristics of a veteran: *person, military, guns, helmet, belt with tools, net, camouflage, army, marching, men, keep us safe, and team*. An important step in the process of primary source analysis is to encourage children to justify their conclusions by answering questions such as, "What makes you think that?" For example, students might look at the 1918 photograph and say, "They look like soldiers." Asking, "What makes you think they might be soldiers?" prompts students to identify details in the photo to support their thinking.

During this lesson, one student circled a helmet in the photograph to show a "clue" about what it might mean to be a veteran. In response, Lisa asked, "Why do you think a veteran might wear a helmet?" The first grader explained, "I see them wearing a helmet so they don't get hurt. If [something] fires at their head, they won't get hurt."

To continue the investigation about what it means to be a veteran, Lisa introduced a color photo of retired Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) attending a veterans' memorial ceremony in 2003. Her purpose in selecting an assortment of images for this lesson was to help students begin to understand that veterans can be men and women; they do not necessarily have to be soldiers or use weapons; and veterans have been

servicing our country for many years. Although WASPs were technically not part of the military during World War II, they were granted veteran status in the 1970's for their service.

Students immediately noticed contrasts from the previous photo: these people looked very different from the men marching in uniforms. Lisa repeated the process of guiding students through an analysis of the photograph by asking them to observe, reflect on, and question details about the photograph as they considered what else the word "veteran" might mean. Again, students drew circles around visual evidence on the white board, as Lisa added their clues to the class' working list of characteristics of veterans. Students discovered that veterans can be women, retired, and "older."

Finally, Lisa handed out printed copies of two additional photographs of veterans on active duty in 1943 and 2004 for closer examination. In pairs, students examined the photos and used pencils to circle clues about what they thought it might mean to be a veteran. The discussion that followed included rich details from the photos about veterans flying in airplanes and using special equipment such as walkie-talkies and goggles.

After observing and discussing all of these different photos of veterans, the students wrote their own working definition of military veterans using the following sentence stem that prompted students to justify their thinking with evidence:

"I think a veteran is someone who _____ because _____."

Students created a complete sentence, for example, "I think a veteran is someone who keeps us safe because they love us." Lisa concluded the lesson by stating that a veteran can be any person who has ever served in any branch of the military.

Lesson 2: How have People Celebrated Veterans Day?

A second lesson prompted students to use photographs to explore various ways to discover how Veterans Day has been celebrated in the United States. During this 45-minute investigation, students looked for clues to figure out what was happening in each "very old" photograph. Once again, students remained sitting in their seats in small groups for the lesson.

Using a familiar example to illustrate her point, Lisa first asked students to imagine they were looking at a photo that included a cake with candles, people wearing colorful cone hats, and presents. The students quickly identified such an event as a birthday party. Before revealing the first historical photograph for this lesson, she gave students magnifying glasses, small white boards, and dry erase markers to help them find and record "clues" about what might be going on in the photos.

The first photo projected on the digital white board showed World War I veterans and a band marching in a parade in November 1938. Lisa asked, "What is happening here? What kind of celebration do you think that is?" Students spent a few moments looking at the image and jotting down ideas on their small

white boards. Next, she led a discussion about what students were observing, thinking, and wondering about as they looked closely at the photo. One boy called out, "It's a parade!" as other students nodded in agreement. Lisa asked, "What makes you think this is a parade? Let's circle some clues you found on the class white board." Students identified evidence in the photo. One student circled some of the men's legs, saying, "They are marching." Another student circled a helmet, adding, "It's part of a uniform." When questioned for details, the student went further to explain that it looked like a military uniform. Students also pointed out musical instruments and onlookers watching the parade.

Finally, someone circled a U.S. flag. Lisa used this clue to guide the students to identify what kind of parade was taking place in the photograph. "Yes, there's a United States flag," she confirmed. "So, is this a Christmas parade?" This question prompted students to call out excitedly that this must be a Veterans Day parade.

The first graders examined three additional historical photographs and concluded that people have also celebrated Veterans Day by listening to speeches, displaying U.S. flags, and singing patriotic songs. To assess students' learning, Lisa provided the following writing prompt:

"One way that Americans celebrate Veterans Day is ..."

Most students wrote more than one answer to this question based on their observations of the four historical photos. For example, one boy wrote that Veterans Day is celebrated by "putting up a flag, having a parade, and having a speech."

The writing prompt sparked informal discussion among students about how exciting it would be to carry out some of their ideas at their school. Comments included: "I think we should invite a guest speaker to come here." "I wish we could have a parade." Recognizing an opportunity to extend students' learning by building on their interest, Lisa asked students how they would feel about planning a school-wide event for the upcoming Veterans Day holiday. The students were eager to begin.

Bringing the Past into the Present

Although organizing a school-wide Veterans Day event was not initially in Lisa's plans, she knew the students' excitement and interest could not only open up authentic interdisciplinary learning opportunities, but also empower students to practice civic action. Research has shown that young children are capable of engaging in various types of scaffolded civic action.¹⁰ The resulting school-wide project connects to Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.

Planning a School-Wide Program

The first graders started the planning process by revisiting the ideas that were written on their assessments at the end of

the second lesson about how people celebrate Veterans Day. Most of the ideas for the program came from those assessments, such as inviting a veteran to give a speech, making posters, and singing patriotic songs. One boy offered, “I think we could sing *The Star Spangled Banner* to the veterans and honor them.” Another class member knew someone who could be a guest speaker for the program—her father, who had served in the Marine Corps Reserves in Iraq. As the students continued to investigate the topic of veterans, the class identified “Service and Sacrifice” as their program theme.

The program took a few weeks to put together, but Lisa believes it was well worth the time. She maximized class time by integrating social studies with other subject areas and holding several brief planning meetings with the class over the course of five weeks. During these planning meetings, she empowered students to take ownership of the program by calling students “Project Managers,” asking questions about how they could execute their ideas, and having the class vote when making important planning decisions.

Importantly, Lisa provided the first graders with a great deal of scaffolding and support as they planned the school-wide Veterans Day program. Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework involves students “taking informed action,” which often requires teacher assistance. The C3 Framework states, “All children deserve the opportunity to learn. To be successful, students will need varying degrees of scaffolding to support their learning.”¹¹ By building on students’ interests and enthusiasm, and by helping them translate their ideas into realistic actions, Lisa provided the support students needed to make the program a reality.

Interdisciplinary Learning

In order to plan their school-wide program, the first graders needed to learn more about veterans and the work they have done as members of the armed services. Reading, writing, music, and art were integral to the project. For example, Lisa taught students new vocabulary and additional information about veterans by reading aloud from children’s literature such as *Sergeant Reckless: The True Story of the Little Horse Who Became a Hero* by Patricia McCormick and *Veterans Day* by Allan Morey.¹²

Lisa’s students used other books as well as webpages that they accessed with iPads to investigate each branch of the military, study symbols and images that represent veterans, and inform their ideas for the upcoming program. The students applied new knowledge during center time as they created patriotic art and images to use as decorations during the ceremony. Students wrote personal messages on each hand-made project so they could double as cards to give to veterans at the end of the program. This was an opportunity to improve writing skills by giving students a chance to write about something that was close to their heart and had personal significance. For example, one boy drew a soldier on his poster and wrote, “You make

us proud. You are amazing.” Lisa noticed that the students’ writing rose to a higher level because they were intrinsically motivated to write on a topic that they cared about.

The class wanted this project to integrate their favorite classes—music and art—into their celebration to honor veterans. Students became advocates by asking the school’s music and art teachers to help them include patriotic songs and a special art project in their program. The music teacher taught all classes to sing *The Star Spangled Banner* for the program. Additionally, the first graders learned to sing a verse of *The Marine’s Hymn*, which they performed just before the guest speaker addressed the student body.

Together with the art teacher, the first graders created a one-of-a-kind gift to present to the veteran guest speaker as a token of gratitude: medals of honor made from clay. The process of designing medals started by discussing what attributes they admire in veterans. Students looked at images of medals online and like many Americans, they were impressed by the Purple Heart. After sketching a design, students molded the design by creating a bas-relief design in clay. The medals were spray painted copper or silver and students added details using paint markers. The medals were then pinned inside an inexpensive open shadow box purchased at a local retail store. Students felt a great sense of accomplishment since their medals mirrored those they identified during their research. They felt like their project was one of importance and significance and would hold a great deal of value to their special guest veteran.

Involving the School Community

Lisa and her students also reached out to the entire school to take the Veterans Day project to the next level. First, they invited family members, faculty, and staff to lend military memorabilia (e.g., photos, medals, and uniforms) for a special display at the school. Items collected for the display represented the different branches of the military while sharing the school’s rich family legacies of service and sacrifice.

During one of the school’s regularly scheduled morning assemblies, Lisa announced to all students and teachers that the first graders were planning a Veterans Day program. Everyone was invited to participate in the school’s Operation Gratitude drive by: (1) writing thank you letters to veterans; (2) creating drawings/artwork for veterans and wounded warriors; and (3) donating some of their own Halloween candy to give to the troops serving overseas as a sacrifice for all of their work and dedication.¹³ The response was overwhelming, with 100 percent of the student body contributing in some way. Altogether, in only four days, 137 pounds of candy, 188 cards, and over 250 works of art were collected and taken to a nearby donation site.

First Graders Lead the Program

Lisa’s first graders beamed with pride as the Veterans Day program began. Students’ patriotic art served as a fitting backdrop for the event. Audience members included the

student body, faculty, staff, family and community members. A Marine Corps Reserve veteran spoke about his experience in the military and answered questions from students about serving in Iraq. For example, some of the older students asked questions about how long he served and what it was like to be in Iraq. Other students asked questions such as, “Were you scared in Iraq?” and “What are the medals [on your uniform] for?” The veteran answered questions and explained how much it meant for him to receive cards from people while he served in the military. He reassured the students that their art, candy, and cards would “lift the spirits” of many veterans. After his presentation, the first graders proudly handed the speaker their gift of hand-crafted medals.

A short video about the meaning of Veterans Day was shown, and all were invited to stand and sing the national anthem. The program concluded with attendees taking part in a gallery walk to observe the military memorabilia on display. Afterwards, several family members who attended the program approached Lisa and offered to assist with the planning and implementation of next year’s Veterans Day celebration at the school.

Conclusion

The first graders in Lisa’s class eagerly participated in both of the lessons described in this article and demonstrated new learning through their responses to the assessment prompts and comments during primary source analysis. By planning and presenting the school-wide Veterans Day program, they were able to transfer and apply the lessons to their own lives. The student-driven project took something abstract and made it tangible. Furthermore, the project allowed first graders to become school leaders for an event that was well received by those in attendance.

In the early grades, it can be tempting for teachers to celebrate or acknowledge holidays superficially, without providing opportunities for children to learn about their significance. Using primary sources such as photographs to introduce children to our nation’s past can enrich children’s understanding of and appreciation for Veterans Day and other patriotic holidays. By allowing students to extend their learning by taking informed action, teachers can also promote civic action and cultivate children’s sustained interest in social studies.🌐

Historical Photos (Used in These Lessons)

Lesson 1: What is a Veteran?

U.S. Army African American infantry marching in France, 1918 (Library of Congress), shown in this article, www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3c16442/.

Retired World War II Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) attending a memorial service for women in the military, 2003 (National Archives), shown in this article, catalog.archives.gov/id/6643072.

Bomber crews of the U.S. Army 9th Air Force, 1943 (Library of Congress), www.loc.gov/resource/fsa.8d31163/.

U.S. Marines in Iraq preparing for a humanitarian aid station for Fallujah citizens, 2004 (National Archives), catalog.archives.gov/id/6693899.

Lesson 2: How have People Celebrated Veterans Day?

World War I veterans on parade in Omaha, Nebraska, 1938 (Library of Congress), www.loc.gov/item/2017717709/.

President Woodrow Wilson delivering a speech on Armistice Day, 1922 (Library of Congress), www.loc.gov/item/2016891804/.

Waiting for an Armistice Day parade in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1942 (Library of Congress), www.loc.gov/item/2017839796/.

Children singing, Armistice Day rally at a school in Lititz, Pennsylvania, 1942 (Library of Congress), www.loc.gov/item/2017840008/.

Children in a Red Cross float for Armistice Day Parade, Belleville, Kansas, ca. 1920, shown in this article , p. 31 (Library of Congress), www.loc.gov/item/2017679952/.

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Notes

1. C. Van West, "Critical Thinking. Teaching with Primary Sources," *The Teaching with Primary Sources Journal* 1, no. 2 (2008), 2–3, www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/quarterly/critical_thinking/pdf/critical_thinking.pdf.
2. An act of Congress, (52 Stat. 351; 5 U. S. Code, Sec. 87a), approved on May 13, 1938, made the 11th of November in each year a legal holiday—a day to be dedicated to the cause of world peace and to be thereafter celebrated and known as "Armistice Day."
3. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "History of Veterans Day" (n.d.). www.va.gov/opa/vetsday/vetdayhistory.asp.
4. The Starpoint School at Texas Christian University is "a laboratory school that provides children with learning disabilities, ages six to eleven, the opportunity to reach their educational potential with the help of TCU faculty, staff, and students." Visit starpoint.tcu.edu/about/.
5. The Library of Congress website has many resources for teaching with primary sources. "The Teacher's Guide for Analyzing Photographs and Prints" is particularly relevant for the activities described in this article, www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Photos_and_Prints.pdf. A general tool for analyzing primary sources is also available at the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Primary_Sources.pdf.
6. A. Savage and S. Wesson, "What Makes You Think That? Kindergarten Students Analyze Primary Sources from the Library of Congress," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 29, no. 1 (September/October 2016), 24–26; D. N. Morgan and T. V. Rasinski, "The Power and Potential of Primary Sources," *The Reading Teacher* 65, no. 8 (2012): 584–594; Savage and Wesson, 2016.

7. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010); National History Standards Task Force, *National Standards for History* (Los Angeles, CA: National Center for History, rev. 1996).
8. NCSS, *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: 2013).
9. American War Library, "What is a Veteran?" (1988), www.americanwarlibrary.com/whatvet.htm.
10. L. Nenadal and R. S. Mistry, "Teacher Reflections on Using Inquiry-based Instruction to Engage Young Children in Conversations about Wealth and Poverty," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 42: 44–54 (2018); S. C. Serriere, "Service Learning to Empower Second Graders as Change Agents," in *Exemplary Elementary Social Studies: Case Studies in Practice*, A. Libresco, J. Alleman, S. Field, and J. Passe, eds. (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2014), 95–110.
11. *C3 Framework*, 15.
12. P. McCormick, *Sergeant Reckless: The True Story of the Little Horse who became a Hero* (New York: Balzer + Bray, 2017); A. Morey, *Veterans Day* (North Mankato, MN: Cantana Learning, 2018).
13. Services that can ship packages to troops overseas include www.uso.org/programs/uso-care-package-program and <http://www.operationgratitude.com>.

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Red Cross float for Armistice Day parade, Belleville, Kansas. These children had been attending nutrition classes. The girls were "friends of milk," and the boys "little milk men," ca. 1920. Photo by Frances Kirkpatrick, nutrition work. (Library of Congress)