

Conducting Interviews to Learn about World War II


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What are the implications of these three contemporary events?

1. In a class discussion, a fifth-grade boy volunteered that his grandfather was a veteran of World War II. The teacher replied, “That can’t be correct. They are all dead.”
2. A grandmother shared how sorry she was that she could not provide the correct answers her granddaughter’s teacher wanted concerning rationing during World War II. As a U.S. Navy nurse she explained, “I never encountered rationing and could only supply a couple of examples I recalled my family and friends saying.”
3. One Friday, more than 100 fifth-grade students gathered in their school library and listened to a Holocaust survivor relate his World War II experiences; a teacher initiated the visit after learning that a student in another grade was the grandchild of a Polish Holocaust survivor.

The World War II generation is indeed dying at a rapid rate, but there are still

healthy individuals who are willing to share their stories. Oral history is an active and meaningful practice for learning about changes and continuity between generations. Grandparents, other relatives, or neighbors of many elementary school students could be interviewed, individually or by the class, to learn more about World War II. Interviews should be properly planned so as to ensure the inclusion of multiple perspectives. In this way, teachers can facilitate empathy and encourage openness to new learning opportunities. Without some accurate, prior knowledge about the World War II era, today’s elementary student will be unable to gain meaningful understanding of how the war impacted children, families, schools, and communities in different ways. But not all teachers have the time, knowledge, or curriculum priorities that allow such a learning experience. Many turn to the use of trade books. Trade books may tell an interesting story, but too often a trade book fails to set the story into the context of the time. This results in students having only superficial knowledge of the potential meaning of a story.

The elementary section in this issue of *Social Education* seeks to assist busy elementary teachers by providing two detailed lesson plans using two popular instructional strategies: oral history interviews; and reading both primary sources and trade books (on the topic of Japanese internment). Both lessons (the one in this article and the one by Theresa M. McCormick that follows) employ skills in literacy essential to the understanding of history while building essential cognitive skills for historical thinking such as perceiving past events and issues as they may have been experienced by people at the time, developing historical empathy (as opposed to present-mindedness), and recognizing cause and effect in an effort to avoid unsupported generalizations. With these goals in mind, both lessons actively engage students in addressing NCSS Standards **II Time, Continuity, and Change**; **III People, Places, and Environments**; **V Individuals, Groups, and Institutions**; **VI Production, Distribution, and Consumption**; **IX Global Connections**; **X Civic Ideals and Practice**. 

Incorporating Multiple Perspectives

Rationale:

Oral history interviews have the potential of providing important information about historical events, and presenting interviewees with the challenge of evaluating multiple perspectives, interpreting information, and trying to draw accurate historical conclusions. Through the process of conducting oral history interviews students gain a greater understanding of the definition of history as well as important social communication skills. Even children in the lower grades can conduct oral history when a teacher invites appropriate, representative guests to visit the class and answer questions the children have previously agreed to ask.

Teacher Background:

Elementary textbooks tend to relate a very generalized narrative about World War II, emphasizing political, economic, and military leaders. World War II affected Americans from a range of backgrounds, cities, towns, and rural areas, many of whom joined together to bring an end to the war. Geographical regional differences in the 1940s were more pronounced than today and interviewing family members in various locations will reflect some of those differences. The more adults interviewed, the greater the possibility of illustrating for students the wide range of roles and experiences during World War II. While students might be eager to rush out and start interviewing, oral history is much more productive when students first learn about the time period and use that knowledge to prepare questions. A common set of questions is required to draw conclusions. Students might add one or two questions unique to their own interests; it's also helpful to have a general open-ended question such as "Is there anything additional you would like to tell me about World War II?"

Lesson Objectives:

1. Students decide on a set of written questions for an interview on life during World War II.
2. Students interview individuals using the predetermined questions, and record the answers.
3. In small groups, students record the common answers and list the unique answers separately.
4. Each group reports its findings to the class by recording and tallying answers on a chart.
5. The class prepares a set of statements that describes the lives of the majority of their grandparents during World War II.
6. Students explain why some of their grandparents may have had experiences very different from those of the majority of the grandparents interviewed.
7. Students compare their research findings with the information they learned.

Exploratory Introduction Procedures:

1. Display the statement: "Not all questions are good questions." Ask the students: "What do you think is meant by that statement?"
2. Ask the students: "What are the characteristics of 'good' questions and 'bad' questions?" List students' responses under the headings "good questions" and "bad questions."

3. Discuss with the students the fact that the kinds of questions asked in an interview are different from those that are usually asked on the short answer test.
4. Using a video of an interview from an early morning television program, display one or two of the TV interviewer's questions. Ask, "Based on our list of characteristics for good and bad questions, raise your hand if you think that question 1 is a good question?" Ask students to give reasons for their answer. Repeat the procedure for the second question.
5. Listen to the tape, repeating as needed, and decide how the question is answered. Is the reply informative? Does the answer lead to another question? Does the speaker relate facts and information? Does the speaker tell how he or she feels?
6. Conclude this portion of the lesson by reviewing the list or characteristics of questions and adding or deleting characteristics as the students see fit. Ask students to explain why good interviewers ask several different types of questions.

Lesson Development Procedures:

1. Small groups of students cooperate and write several questions for each of the following categories: (a) fact or information questions; (b) questions expressing feelings; (c) questions that ask for conclusions, opinions, or evaluations.
Or provide students with a list of possible questions. Have them select any of the questions they believe are appropriate or substitute their own new questions.

Possible Appropriate Questions to Ask Grandparents

How old were you during World War II?

During the war, how did you learn about the events that were taking place?

What did you personally do to contribute to the war effort?

How was recycling different during World War II from what we do today?

What did other members of your family do to contribute to the war efforts?

Who did you know who was in military service?

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When you and your friends discussed the war, what did you talk about? What didn't you talk about?

What things did you do in school to learn about the war?

How did the war affect your everyday life?

What did you do for fun or entertainment during the war years?

Do you remember what you did when you heard the war was over?

What feelings or fears did you have during the war?

What do you think are the most important two or three things for young people to know about World War II?

Is there something else that you want to tell me or is there something about World War II you think I should know that I have not asked about?

2. Small groups share the questions they have selected.
3. Agree to the total number of questions to ask. Discuss why it might be helpful to know the age of the person during World War II and to know if the speaker is a man or a woman.
4. Entire class comes to an agreement on which questions to include on the list.
5. Check over the list to see that there are some questions from the three groupings: information or fact gathering questions; expressions of feelings; and conclusions or evaluations about life during the war. The teacher prepares a list of the final questions, leaving space where each answer can be recorded.
6. Students practice reading or asking the questions and learn how to correctly operate a tape recorder, if necessary.
7. Students conduct the interviews as homework. Allow several days to accomplish the interviews and to record the answers on the list of questions. The teacher may want students to listen to the tape and write the answers in the space on the paper; parents may assist children with this portion of the assignment or older students may work in pairs to accomplish this task. For young children, grandparents might tell the child the answer and write it on the paper.
8. Display a chart containing one question asked of the grandparents. Teacher demonstrates the procedures for recording responses for one or two questions. Call upon one student to give a response to the first question. Teacher asks: "Will everyone who has the same or a similar answer to this question raise your hand?" Count the number and tally the number of responses next to the answer on the chart. Teacher asks: "What is a different response?" Follow the same procedures for tallying the number of similar or common responses. Repeat until all different responses are recorded on the chart.

9. Distribute the charts to groups of students, who write and tally their responses on the chart. Pass the charts from group to group so that new responses can be added and students can total tally marks as appropriate.

10. When all answers are listed on the appropriate charts, display charts one at a time so the entire class can observe the completed chart. Examine the chart by using questions:

Which were the most common answers given by our grandparents to each of the questions?

Which questions received the greatest number of different responses?

Which questions have the least number of different responses?

How might these results be explained?

11. Conclude the discussion by writing several statements that describe the data using such stems as:

During World War II, most of our grandparents did...

During World War II, our grandparents did not have the opportunity to do ...

Words that describe the lives of our grandparents during World War II are ...

When we compare our lives today with those of our grandparents during World War II, we think ...

Compared to what we learned in our other lesson about World War II, the interviews tell us that the lives of our grandparents during World War II were...

12. Display the students' conclusions prominently in the classroom. Conclude this portion of the lesson by having several students share what benefits they received from learning about and doing the interviews. Have each student write a thank you note to the person he or she interviewed and include several statements about what the class learned from doing the interviews. (Use this assignment as an individual assessment, but do send the notes to the people interviewed.)
13. Since historians usually share their information with others, the class or groups might prepare a booklet or other type of presentation listing their conclusions and present it to the public (or school) library or place it on a website so that others can learn from their efforts. (If done in groups, this activity may serve as a final assessment.)

Expansion Procedures:

1. Begin a class session by reminding students that they have been learning how to interview people with good questions. Ask: "Who can give us an example of a good question you asked?" After several examples ask, "Explain what characteristics you think make a good question." Remind the students that even though they learned a lot, they interviewed only a small sample of people who were

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children during World War II. Ask: "Do you think children living in another part of the United States might have experienced the war differently?" "What differences do you think children living in Great Britain, France, Germany, or Japan might have had?"

In your community there may be people who lived through World War II in other nations. Use the questionnaire as the basis for interviewing those from other nations, but add several questions that will help students place the nation in its proper location and historical situation during World War II. Possible questions for those who did not live in the U.S. include:

(Present a world map before asking this first question)
Can you show me where you lived during the war?

Was your nation a member of the Axis or the Allies?

What hardships did you and your family experience during World War II?

During the war, what did you hear about Americans?

When, and why, did you come to the U.S. to live?

What was the most difficult thing for you to do when you first came to the U.S.?

2. If there is a little time, students might read or listen to several interviews at one of the following urls:

Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/vets/civquestions.html

U.S. Latino and Latina World War II Oral History Project, www.lib.utexas.edu/ww2latinos/

The Panel of Elders who tell of their lives in Europe during World War II, atschool.eduweb.co.uk/chatback/english/memories/people.html

The Farm Labor Project, www.ashp.cuny.edu/oralhistory/accom.html#

Telling Their Stories, www.tellingstories.org/

Survivors of the Shoah, college.usc.edu/vhi/about/surviv-ingauschwitz/index.php

3. Alternatively students might interview a person who was not a child during World War II and compare that person's experiences with that of those who were children. Students should follow the same procedures for interviewing and recording answers.

Questions that might be asked of those who served in the military include:

Where did you serve and with whom did you serve during the war?

What kind of training did you receive?

Why did you join the military?

How did the war change your life?

What do you think are the most important two or three things for young people to know about World War II?

Who in the war did you know that you would consider a hero?

How has serving in the military affected the rest of your life?

4. Final summary of learning: Students create charts of their new findings and display them in the classroom. Discuss similarities and differences in the experiences of the people they interviewed. Explain to the students that they do not have the time to interview all possible people who have a story about World War II. Ask: "How in the future might you, or even your children, learn more about the impact of World War II on the lives of children and adults?"

RESOURCES

Walbert, Kathryn. "Oral History Projects." *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 4 (March/April 2004).

Gray, Thomas E. "A World War II Oral History Project for Eighth Graders." *Middle Level Learning/Social Education* (January/February 2001): 7-9.

Lark, Lisa A. "Learning Early Twentieth-Century History through First-Person Interviews." *Social Education* 71, no. 6 (October 2007): 308-311.

LaRue, Paul. "Promoting Historic Preservation in the Classroom." *Social Education* 71, no. 6 (October 2007): 312-315.

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