

Lessons From History: Teacher and Student Conceptions of the Meaning of History

The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to describe and analyze both student and teacher perceptions of history by examining the various factors that influence the meaning of history: the purposes, patterns, generalizations, and conceptions of relevance that surround the study of history. Evans believes there is little field research on the objectives and goals of history educators, but rather the focus of recent research has centered on the content and methodology surrounding social studies education. Furthermore, he believes that teacher conceptions are crucial to curriculum decisions.

Data for this study were obtained from interviews and observations at three San Francisco area high schools. These schools represented a wide range of both academic ability and socio-cultural backgrounds. Following the data collection, patterns and themes were identified and compared among the three groups. Teachers' perceptions and conceptions of history varied greatly. Evans described each teacher's conception by identifying one as a social activist reformer who believed the main purpose of historical study is to solve current social problems. Another was described as a cosmic philosopher exhibiting evident Bahai faith influence. A third teacher was considered a storyteller who believed the primary function of history education was to aid in the understanding of current events and issues. Furthermore, Evans wrote, "Though some similarities exist, the differences in their conceptions are striking" (208).

Evans' research reflected that school, family, media, and visits to historic sites affected students' perception of history and although they are not singular, history teachers do play a major role in the shaping of student perceptions. Evans noted that students were not only able to identify their teacher's conceptions, but also the majority appeared to share them. Admittedly this was a limited study, however, Evans asks the reader whether or not this implies that student conceptions may change with the next teacher and suggests further research on this topic.

Evans, Ronald W. "Lessons From History: Teacher and Student Conceptions of the Meaning of History." Theory and Research in Social Education 16.3 (1988): 203-224.