

## **Reasons Students Give for Studying American History**

This limited study examined students' responses to two questions: "Why do you think they teach you American history in school?" and "How might learning history help you in your life away from school?" The study consisted of thirty Midwestern students: twelve fifth graders, twelve eighth graders and six high school students. The subjects were selected from classrooms identified as having exemplary history teachers, and the research consisted of observations, questionnaires and extensive student and teacher interviews. Interestingly, "Without mentioning him directly...students (in their own unique ways) invoked George Santayana and his famous rationale for studying history—that those who fail to learn the lessons of the past are condemned to repeat them" (2). This rationale appeared in some form on all three grade levels, however, it was more prevalent among the older students.

Unfortunately, research trends indicate that secondary students consistently rate their history classes as the least interesting and irrelevant in the curriculum. Additionally,

"How students view the purpose of engaging in topical or disciplinary study appears deeply connected to what they eventually learn and understand. The purposes they bring to bear on their efforts to learn about something, and the role their peer, parents, and especially their teachers play in the process, are associated with how they construct meaning and link it to their own lives" (3-4).

Although students were allowed to give more than one rationale, the most frequently given answers to "Why do you think they teach you American history in school?" were "to know everything" (12) and "I don't know" (9). The most popular response to the question "How might learning history help you in your life away from school?" was "not sure" (12), followed by "learning lessons from the past" (8), and "jobs" (8). Additionally, several common themes (regardless of age) emerged including a progressive interpretation of history, the perception that the purpose of history class is to "learn everything", and some ethnic-based interest in history. Furthermore, several students expressed a utilitarian rationale; that is, students would have information for general conversation with their family and knowledge of history would be of some value in certain occupations.

In conclusion, this study illustrates "particularly well the possible influence a lack of explicit discussion of rationales may have on learning American history" (23). It recommends a need to understand how history is learned. This knowledge would result in a shift away from just "the facts" and would instead focus on various interpretations and perspectives of historical situations, discussions based on various constructivist views of history and encourage evidentiary questioning.

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