"The Making of America" and Closing the Professional Development Gap for Elementary Educators in Teaching Diverse Historical Perspectives

What specific opportunities do elementary school teachers have in the most prestigious history and social studies professional development programs? The answer, it turns out, is not many. Some brave K-5 educators occasionally participate in leading PD programs for history and social studies, but almost inevitably such programs cater to secondary teachers and often even more narrowly to AP U.S. and World History instructors. The needs of elementary educators, many of whom have never even taken a college-level history course and yet are expected to teach the full span of American and world history, are largely unmet.

It was with this challenge in mind that the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (GLI) applied for and received a two-week residential summer institute from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), "The Making of America: Colonial Era to Reconstruction," which was held at George Washington University in July 2023. We served, respectively, as the director (Denver Brunsman) and lead facilitating teacher (Connie López-Fink) for the institute. Our purpose here is to share our experience in an effort to promote expanded effective professional development opportunities in history and social studies for elementary educators.[1]

Go Big

[1] "NEH Summer Institute for K-8 Educators: Lectures and Resources from The Making of America," Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed February 5, 2024, https://www.gilderlehrman.org/programs-and-events/neh-summer-institute-k-8-educators/lectures-and-resources-making-america.

In designing the "Making of America" with elementary teachers in mind, we broke one of the normal conventions of leading history professional development programs: focusing narrowly on a single historical event or person. Instead, we created a broad scope – the first half of American history, from the colonial era through the Civil War and Reconstruction – to match the content typically taught by elementary educators, especially in the fifth grade. For this reason, we also opened the institute to middle school teachers, who also teach this content and are similarly underserved by professional development programs in history and social studies.

In total, thirty-five K-8 educators participated in the institute from every region and twenty-five different states and the District of Columbia. Fourteen of the participants, or 40 percent, work primarily with elementary-age students and the remaining twenty-one, or 60 percent, work predominantly with middle school-age students. These percentages reflect roughly the percentage of applicants from each school group who applied to the institute. They also suggest that the first problem in elementary professional development is helping K-5 teachers to self-identify as scholars who seek intellectual opportunities as do secondary and, to a lesser extent, middle school educators. In many respects, elementary teachers face a more daunting intellectual challenge in the classroom than their secondary and middle school counterparts. State legislatures commonly charge K-5 educators with covering vast amounts of historical information, particularly from the colonial era through the Civil War and Reconstruction, without providing the necessary training or resources. As one fifth grade teacher in our institute confessed, she is responsible for the development and implementation of her school's social studies curriculum and yet never had a history class in college.

To help bridge this content gap, GLI and Brunsman first developed "The Making of America" as a summer seminar (not funded by the NEH) for K-8 educators at George

Washington University in 2018 and offered it again in 2019. In both years, the seminar received more applications than any other GLI summer professional development program. In summer 2021, GLI and project director Brunsman first led "The Making of America" as a one-week NEH virtual institute (due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it could not meet in person). The institute received more than two hundred applications, more than any other NEH professional development program in the 2021 cycle. The pattern held in 2023. We worried that expanding the institute from one to two weeks would risk losing participants. Instead, "The Making of America" received more than three hundred applications, again among the most of any NEH institute in the 2023 cycle. As much as we would like to flatter ourselves that the enthusiasm was due to our leadership, something else was clearly at play: "The Making of America" was the only one of dozens of NEH summer institutes to appeal specifically to elementary and middle school educators.

Clearly, K-8 teachers respond when high-quality PD programming is designed for them. Again, rather than a narrow focus, the "Making of America" traced the people, ideas, and events that made America into a cultural, social, and political reality. Teachers learned about Indigenous peoples and colonial societies, the American Revolution and the U.S. Constitution, slavery and early U.S. political and economic systems, and the causes and consequences of the Civil War and Reconstruction. To give the institute thematic coherence, the "Making of America" focused on two interconnected themes: (1) efforts to forge a union in a country with extensive regional, cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity; and (2) the meaning, experience, and contest for freedom and equality waged by different groups, from Native Americans to American colonists in the Revolutionary era, African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction, and women seeking political rights from the American Revolution into the nineteenth century.

This approach to the first half of American history, which combines a chronological narrative with a clear thematic foundation, was designed specifically to benefit elementary teachers. As one participant wrote in her application, "When I happened to open my email and saw the announcement for "The Making of America: Colonial Era to Reconstruction" institute, I was amazed. I felt like someone had tailor-made a program just for me. . . . I have taught several different subjects over the past eight years, but the one constant has been 4th Grade Social Studies, which follows the history of the United States from the Revolutionary period through Reconstruction." We acknowledged that elementary teachers must be generalists, but, within the broad span of American history, they can also develop specialties, as do any working scholars in the historical profession. Accordingly, the "Making of America" treated elementary educators as the professionals they are by pitching the content at an advanced college and graduate level; no content was "dumbed down." At the same time, we worked to create a welcoming environment for elementary teachers to collaborate and grow, particularly as they each completed a lesson plan that incorporated primary sources, historical evidence, and pedagogical methods from their two weeks of immersive learning. The institute provided teachers with the necessary support, from resources and pedagogical strategies to individual consultations with López-Fink, to not only to complete a single lesson plan but to enhance their full American history curriculum.

Teaching Diverse Perspectives

Among their historical content gaps, participants in the "Making of America" expressed a particular need for information about marginalized groups in early America, especially Native Americans and African Americans. Many of our elementary participants work at Title I schools in either urban or rural settings and did not feel adequately prepared before the institute to share America's diverse history. "I feel unprepared to teach my students about our nation's early

history in an accurate and age appropriate way," related one second grade teacher in her application. "I find that many of my students are completely unfamiliar with the history of cultural and social issues that pertain to their own heritage, as well as the heritage of others. . . . they often have no background knowledge on slavery, oppression of different peoples, or an overall grasp of the experiences of different cultures through time." The content gap in diverse perspectives particularly troubled our institute participants because teachers felt that they were shortchanging their own students.

Here the institute's focus on diversity and the contributions of multiple cultural groups in forging the United States was especially welcome. A constant refrain from educators, including our group, is that they care about diversity and teaching about marginalized groups, but that they (1) do not know how and (2) do not have time with all the other topics that they must cover in their curriculum. The institute sought to address both issues. By moving from one week to two weeks, we had two days to devote to each of the five time periods covered in the institute (Colonial Era, American Revolution, Early Republic, Jacksonian Era, and Civil War and Reconstruction). In this way, each topic became a two-day unit. Within each unit, we included meaningful content about different cultural groups in the four main daily components of the institute curriculum: (1) lectures and discussions led by Brunsman and other university professor guest scholars; (2) pedagogical sessions led by López-Fink; (3) workshops for applying primary sources in the classroom led jointly by Brunsman and López-Fink; and (4) museum- and place-based learning at historical sites in and around Washington, D.C.

Taking African American history as an example, a participant would encounter Black experiences throughout the full institute starting on the very first day. Brunsman's opening lecture for the institute, "The Cultural Spectrum of Colonial America," attempted to capture the

rich diversity both among and within the three primary cultural groups in the colonial era, Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans. In addition, Brunsman shared the latest scholarly research on the Atlantic Slave Trade and highlighted the online Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database and accompanying materials as potentially pathbreaking resources in the elementary and middle school classroom for their depth of information and ease of use.[2]

Following the lecture, Brunsman and López-Fink facilitated a discussion with the participants about one of the required texts for the institute, Clint Smith's *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery across America*.[3] We chose Smith's book to help participants to "read" historical sites according to the institute's themes of diversity/union and equality/freedom. For each site visited, we asked participants to consider a series of questions: Why was a historical site or museum created? When was it created? Was a particular site created to privilege one group of Americans over another? If so, has the site taken steps toward being more inclusive? By pushing teachers to analyze critically how public historical sites have represented America's diverse past, we hoped to spark reflection about how, as educators, we all make similar choices.

To begin this reflective process, in our first discussion, we divided the participants into five groups to engage in the "Big Paper" pedagogical strategy/method.[4] On five large sheets of

[2] "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database," SlaveVoyages, accessed February 5, 2024, https://www.slavevoyages.org/. For background on the database, see David Eltis, "The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2001): 9-17.
[3] Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery across America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021).
[4] "Big Paper: Building a Silent Conversation," Facing History & Ourselves, February 24, 2008, https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/big-paper-building-silent-conversation; Matthew Lynch, "How to Implement the Big Paper: Building a Silent Conversation Teaching Strategy in Your Classroom," The Edvocate, March 18, 2021, https://www.theedadvocate.org/how-to-implement-the-big-paper-building-a-silent-conversation-teaching-strategy-in-your-classroom/.

paper, we posted quotes from Smith's book, taken mostly from his chapter visiting Gorée Island, today part of the city of Dakar, Senegal, off the coast of central West Africa. During the Atlantic Slave Trade, the island served as the site for the House of Slaves, a warehouse for shipping enslaved Africans to the western hemisphere, with its infamous "Door of No Return." In *How the Word Is Passed,* Smith uses his visit to Gorée and the House of Slaves to contrast the expansive education efforts on the island with the comparatively weak coverage of slavery in the American education system.

For the Big Paper activity, the five groups moved between stations with the different passages from Smith's book. We encouraged them to begin with a silent read and write, using post-it notes, to annotate, leave comments, and generally mark up the document. In addition, we charged the participants, whenever possible, to post compelling questions that applied to all the passages. The responses were telling. Many teachers embraced a key idea in Smith's text that, in teaching about slavery, we should not make the institution the only defining characteristic for enslaved people. For this reason, in recent years it has become customary to refer to people who lived in bondage under slavery as enslaved Africans, enslaved African Americans, or simply the enslaved rather than "slaves," a best practice that our institute adopted. In his engagement with public historians and other educators on Gorée Island, Smith provides an additional strategy: devote time to teaching students about African peoples and cultures before the Atlantic Slave Trade. As an institute participant posted on one of the book's passages, "Humanize the African history so that when slavery is taught it is not the only thing students know about Black history." Another teacher used this theme for their overarching question: "How can I incorporate more into my teaching the highlights of Black people before slavery?"

Other teachers focused on more common and general questions that educators confront in today's educational and political climate. "When do you begin teaching the story?" "How do we tell the truth without making people feel bad?" And perhaps the most common question: "I want to teach more of these stories, but then I don't have enough time in my curriculum for other stories. How do I find the right balance?"

In sum, the Big Paper activity successfully provided a platform where the teachers could freely discuss their classroom experiences and begin to bond as a learning community. While the conversations took place, Brunsman and López-Fink circulated around the room to get a sense of the diverse levels of background knowledge and questions that naturally surfaced during the discussion protocol. Having teachers step into the learning role also allowed them to quickly realize how they could easily use the Big Paper strategy in their own classrooms with different texts. This activity effectively set the stage for the intertwined history content and pedagogy focus for the rest of the institute.

To the practical issue of time, the other common concern expressed by the institute's participants aside from "how," we attempted to provide an overarching answer with multiple individual examples. Within any American history curriculum, the content must inevitably deal with events and issues related to Native Americans and African Americans, from European settlement and westward expansion to the coming of the Civil War, even if particular curriculums do not emphasize how people of color experienced these events. The broad answer to the issue of time, then, is to include diverse perspectives on topics that must already be taught. By providing elementary educators with the content knowledge and resources, particularly primary sources, for the five major periods in early American history, they all left the institute with a "toolbox" to teach inclusively. Naturally, we advocate extending from mandated topics

and materials when possible, but we attempted to show that incorporating diverse perspectives does not require radically rewriting or violating existing curriculums. Rather, teachers can build space to share the experiences of different groups within existing historical narratives.

For example, moving from the unit on Colonial America, our unit on the American Revolution included extensive content and pedagogical material on how different African Americans "declared independence" in the Revolutionary era, whether it was answering the call of Virginia royal governor Lord Dunmore's proclamation offering freedom to enslaved people who came to the British side or using emerging state laws to push for emancipation and gradual emancipation in the new United States. Among other materials, our unit on Jeffersonian America included primary resources and content on Gabriel's Rebellion, a planned slave uprising in Richmond, Virginia, in the summer of 1800.[5]

African American experiences became a particular focus in the last units of the institute on Jacksonian America and the Civil War and Reconstruction. For the former, Professor Christopher Bonner of the University of Maryland presented on "African American Politics and the Shape of Freedom" to highlight, especially, the role of free Blacks in agitating for expanded citizenship while also contesting slavery. We followed Bonner's lecture by visiting the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture to view its exhibitions and work with the museum's education specialists on pedagogical strategies for teaching about Black history. For the Civil War unit, teachers viewed a recorded lecture by Brunsman on "The West, Slavery, and the Causes of the Civil War" to flip the classroom and provide more space for

[5] For Dunmore's Proclamation and African American emancipation efforts in the American Revolutionary era, see Robert G. Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016). For Gabriel's Rebellion, see Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

discussion about classroom application. On the last day of the institute, Professor Kellie Carter Jackson of Wellesley College spoke on "Understanding Reconstruction: Causes, Consequences, and Connections" before leading another discussion about classroom application. Each of these sessions provided a wealth of primary sources to further address the question of how to integrate diverse perspectives into existing curricular frameworks.

In their sessions, Brunsman, Bonner, and Carter Jackson also discussed African American historiography, that is, the history of how scholars have interpreted Black experiences in America, particularly related to slavery. It is a fair question whether elementary educators need to understand historiography, especially when they will likely never teach such concepts to their students. We witnessed the value of such professional development in discussions connected to our visits to two former slave plantations, Mount Vernon and Arlington House (today part of Arlington Cemetery). For generations, scholars of slavery have debated the utility of emphasizing the cruelty and inhumanity of the institution versus stressing the humanity of enslaved people as expressed in their family lives and other creative adaptations and resistance to enslavement.[6] This background, in addition to reading and discussing Clint Smith's *How the Word Is Passed*, equipped teachers to detect how Arlington House had emphasized the culture and agency of enslaved people while Mount Vernon had a more balanced approach that gave equal attention to violent forms of discipline and enslaved resistance. The teachers overwhelmingly favored the latter approach, for, however laudable, stressing enslaved agency

[6] For a classic work on the dehumanizing nature of slavery, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) and, more recently, Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). For examples of efforts to recover the cultural agency of enslaved people, see Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113-24.

without first explaining the horrors of slavery could be misleading. These and other discussions revealed the pedagogical value of elementary teachers engaging with historical debates.

Outcomes

Although it will take years to fully measure the benefits of advanced professional development programs like the "Making of America" on elementary teachers, the early signs appear overwhelmingly positive. We can already see the positive returns of what one participant called a "two-week crash course" in American history in the lesson plans produced for the institute and in survey results from the teachers.

On the final day of the institute, teachers presented their lesson plans, developed over their two weeks in Washington, D.C., in grade level groups. Of the fourteen elementary educators, eight (57 percent) completed lessons on topics related to Native American and/or African American history. The same pattern carried over to middle school teachers; in total, twenty-one (60 percent) of all the lesson plans emphasized diverse perspectives in early American history. The elementary lesson topics, likely inspired by our Native American content and visit to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, included "Contrasting Viewpoints on the Trail of Tears," "Two Ways of Viewing the World – Native Americans and Europeans," and "Different Perspectives on the First Thanksgiving." Among the lessons incorporating African American history, one explored Black and Indigenous perspectives on the American Revolution, which drew directly from the content and primary resources provided in sessions by Brunsman and López-Fink.

In their survey results, taken in the weeks immediately following the institute, the teachers also expressed the value of the professional development. Among the participants, 100

percent reported that they had learned a lot on the topic of the institute, that the institute successfully emphasized the two interrelated themes of diversity and freedom, and that they would share what they learned with other teachers in their schools.

The teachers also provided qualitative feedback about why the professional development experience had been so enriching. Nearly every response cited the advanced quality of the program. According to one participant, “The institute was invaluable. School started almost a month ago, and I have used resources and strategies that I acquired this summer. The knowledge and expertise of the professors and other presenters made me feel confident that we were receiving the best from the best.” Multiple responses also lauded the applicability of the institute’s resources. “The Making of America” Summer Institute aligned PERFECTLY with the state standards I teach,” according to one participant. “Each day of the two weeks of the institute was reflective of a ‘unit’ I teach throughout the year. EVERYTHING was directly usable and applicable to my classroom instruction.”

Several other teachers commended the institute for presenting content and strategies for teaching diverse perspectives to young learners. One elementary educator commented, “The program’s themes of freedom and citizenship of diverse groups throughout America’s history were presented in a way that not only gave me new knowledge and insight, but also gave me the tools to share that knowledge with my elementary age students.” According to another participant, “The program did an amazing job showing different typically underrepresented groups meaningfully. Not in a way that felt like they were just checking the boxes to talk about the groups.” Such feedback affirms the approach of incorporating diversity in each of the institute’s mini-units.

By several measures, the effusive response to the institute "The Making of America: Colonial Era to Reconstruction" highlights the necessity of expanding scholarly professional development programs for elementary educators. From the high number of applicants to the universally positive evaluations for the "Making of America," there is firm evidence for the value of such programs for K-5 educators. But perhaps the most significant evidence is less tangible. What happens when elementary teachers are treated like the scholars and intellectuals they are? Students are the ultimate beneficiaries. "Beyond a doubt," according to a fifth grade teacher in the institute, "I know that my depth of knowledge directly affects how engaged my students are in class. Sharing tidbits of perspective and introducing novel and engaging new strategies has made history fun and a favorite class for my students." It is high time that all elementary teachers feel so empowered.