

Oral History: A Tool for the Elementary and Middle Classroom

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation  
in the Honors Program  
Liberty University  
Spring 2022

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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### **Abstract**

Modern historical instruction requires educators to cover broad expanses of history and prepare students for standardized testing. In the push to meet state standards and cover the vast curriculum in short periods of time, many educators have begun to teach to the textbook. Much to the detriment of students, this educational practice has favored periodization and content quantity over the development of crucial historical skills. Rather than adhering to popular education trends, teachers can consider implementing oral history projects within their elementary and middle school classrooms. Oral history is a methodology that employs first-hand accounts to teach about key historical events. It is well backed by research, is aligned with educational practices and principles, and its implementation in the classroom can be a useful educational tool. This research reviews existing literature on oral history, discusses how to incorporate it at the elementary and middle school level, and addresses objections to its implementation. It concludes with a case study on Dr. Matthew Fash's Veteran's History Project and advice for educators beginning oral history practices in their classrooms.

### **Oral History: A Tool for the Elementary and Middle Classroom**

Oral history is a historical tool that works to preserve first-hand memories and historical accounts. It utilizes recorded interviews, through video, audio, and/or transcriptions, to record interpretations of peoples' lives, an event, a way of life, or a time period.<sup>1</sup> Overall, oral history is a documented record of spoken memories about an individual's experiences. The preservation of oral histories turns the lives, experiences, and memories of individuals into historical resources available to the public. As teachers engage with an educational field where 70 to 90 percent of social studies instruction is based around textbooks, oral history use in the classroom provides an alternative avenue of instruction.<sup>2</sup> Oral history's use is supported by wide research, aligns with educational principles and theories, and it can be effectively implemented in elementary and middle school classrooms.

Research has emerged more prevalently over the last three decades about oral history and its application within the classroom. Scholars such as Ritchie Donald and Paul Thompson have shed light on the technique, process, and purpose of oral history.<sup>3</sup> On a larger scale, organizations such as the Columbia University Libraries, the Library of Congress, and StoryCorps have formalized the process of preserving oral history records.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, educational researchers and educators such as Margaret Crocco, Glenn Whitman, and Matthew Fash have completed more specialized research into the application of oral history in secondary

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards Through Oral History* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Smith Crocco, "Putting the Actors Back on Stage: Oral History in the Secondary School Classroom," *The Social Studies* 89, no. 1 (1998): 19.

<sup>3</sup> Donald, *Doing Oral History*; Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*.

<sup>4</sup> Columbia University Libraries, "Oral History Archives"; Library of Congress, "Veteran's History Project"; StoryCorps, "StoryCorps Database."

classrooms.<sup>5</sup> With this base of research, study surrounding oral history within the elementary classroom is less comprehensive and could use additional exploration.

### **General Advantages of Oral History**

Existing research shows the clear benefits of oral history for students of all grade levels.<sup>6</sup> One benefit is the key historical skills that it helps students to practice and strengthen. During the oral history process, students are able to practice effective written and oral communication, extensive primary and secondary source research, recording, analyzing, and historical preservation.<sup>7</sup> Students also gain hands-on experience with practical skills like conducting interviews, communicating professionally, and sending thank you cards.<sup>8</sup> In addition, state standards directly align with many of these historical skills. For example, students will develop social science skills covered in the standards such as historical analysis and research, community-based history and research, chronological thinking, decision making, and learning civics through history.<sup>9</sup> Within language and communication standards, students practice empathic listening, acquire confidence in public speaking and oral communication, enhance creative collaboration skills, and grow in interview techniques, transcription, and journalism or reporting. Within media and technology standards, students learn media literacy in sharing projects, video production, and digital storytelling. Students also work towards critical thinking

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<sup>5</sup> Crocco, "Putting the Actors Back on Stage"; Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*; Fash, interview with the author.

<sup>6</sup> Charles R. Lee, and Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Practice and Pedagogy: Oral History in the Classroom," *The Oral History Review* 25, no. 1 (1998): 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed Hamad Al-Rabaani, "Views of Omani Social Studies Teachers About Using Oral History in the Classroom." *Asian Social Science* 11, no. 22 (2015): 62.

<sup>8</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Department of Education, "Virginia Standards of Learning," <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/index.shtml>.

standards like understanding personal identity.<sup>10</sup> Overall, oral history projects can work to meet a variety of standards from various subject areas.

Another major advantage of oral history is the level of engagement that it provides for students. Modern educators need to focus on providing meaningful historical instruction.<sup>11</sup> Rather than orienting historical instruction around just facts and lectures, students need the opportunity to truly engage with the historical study and see the value of the content. By becoming deeply engaged in the educational process, students are able to cultivate “a conscious, active, and purposeful engagement” with the world and history.<sup>12</sup> Oral history, by nature, allows teachers and students to be “reciprocally” engaged in constructing historical understanding.<sup>13</sup> Oral history permits students to participate in the preservation of history and to meet those involved in historical events.<sup>14</sup> Research supports the idea that oral history positively increases students’ attitudes toward social studies.<sup>15</sup> This may be because it fights the typical student misconception that history is dull, meaningless, or useless. One student reflected, “so often students... feel like bystanders in history. Through oral history, students are able to interview family members, people in their community, and to participate in sort of an ongoing historical

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<sup>10</sup> Cliff Mayotte and Dave Eggers, *The Power of Story: The Voice of Witness Teacher’s Guide to Oral History* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s Books, 2013), 133.

<sup>11</sup> Yarema E. Allan, “A Decade of Debate: Improving Content and Interest in History Education,” *History Teacher*, May 2002, 391.

<sup>12</sup> Larry E. Hudson, and Ellen Durrigan Santora, “Oral History: An Inclusive Highway to the Past,” *History Teacher*, February 2003, 208.

<sup>13</sup> Hudson and Santora, “Oral History,” 211.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Rabaani, “Views of Omani Social Studies Teachers,” 58.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

narrative that they can be a part of, that they can insert themselves into, as well as being able to use their lives, their direct experience, and their identity.”<sup>16</sup>

It may also be because going beyond a textbook allows students to engage with history in a more authentic fashion. While textbooks offer a great framework for study, they often sacrifice complexity in favor of periodization. Inviting oral history into the discussion allows students to engage with complex and nuanced discussion of historical events.<sup>17</sup> By personally interacting with those who lived through historical events, students may learn to value the history.

Oral history projects also provide a first step in the training of future historians and social science educators.<sup>18</sup> Students are able to gain practical experience in historical work and better gauge what historical careers may entail. Students can practice uncovering historical knowledge, rather than simply learning about what is already written.<sup>19</sup> In addition, students are able to see themselves as historical actors and begin to see how history documents the human story which they will be living through.

Other key benefits of oral history are that it helps students increase historical empathy skills and it expands the understanding of the chronology of historical events. Through oral histories, students are able to analyze historical events through a variety of points of view. This exposure broadens students’ understanding of the past by providing varying interpretations. Through this interaction, students engage in an exercise of empathy for their subjects.<sup>20</sup> They are

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<sup>16</sup> Mayotte and Eggers, *The Power of Story*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> Crocco, “Putting the Actors Back on Stage,” 20.

<sup>18</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Rabaani, “Views of Omani Social Studies Teachers,” 60.

able to place themselves in the point of view of various historical actors. Furthermore, research highlights that students often struggle to place events in order of occurrence and in relative time periods.<sup>21</sup> To combat this, quality social studies instruction works to help students understand the general timing of key events. By meeting first-hand participants in historical events and deeply connecting with their stories, students can begin to visualize the time period in light of the human connection they have made with their interviewee. In doing so, students are able to place key historic events on a relative timeline.<sup>22</sup>

The flexibility of oral history is another major benefit. The variety of project topics, research, interviewee selection, and final product formatting allows oral history to naturally fit into a variety of standards and curriculums.<sup>23</sup> Due to this, oral history can be easily integrated into previously existing curriculums and also implemented into interdisciplinary studies.<sup>24</sup> For example, an oral history could provide students with background for a piece of literature studied in English class.<sup>25</sup> Or an oral history with subtitles could help students strengthen world language skills. Additionally, oral history is flexible with its monetary and equipment demands. While textbooks and other sources require continual investment to keep them current, oral history can extend the curriculum or incorporate additional perspectives with little or no additional cost.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Dougherty, "Representation of Historical Events within Social Studies Textbooks Using Critical Literacy to Enhance the Social Studies Classroom," *Education Masters*, (2012): 14.

<sup>22</sup> Karen Horn, "Oral History in the Classroom: Clarifying the Context Through Historical Understanding," *Yesterday and Today* 11, (2014): 82.

<sup>23</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 91.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Crocco, "Putting the Actors Back on Stage," 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Educators can spend money on equipment if grants are available, but oral history can also be done for free with cell phones or other equipment that schools have access to.<sup>27</sup>

Oral history is also flexible through its incorporation of diverse academic disciplines. For example, oral history can be used in science by interviewing residents of a community about local scientific history (oil spills, fires, nuclear power plant disasters). Or elementary students could interview local farmers about their work and relationship to the community. To incorporate language arts, students could do a written reflection on the interview or interview a writer from the community. Math could be incorporated into an oral history project by interviewing local engineers from the community who worked on local buildings or infrastructure. Foreign language can be incorporated by interviewing someone in the target language or by using interviews to explore different cultures and customs. Ethics and community service could be incorporated by preserving the school's history or by examining how the community has changed over time.<sup>28</sup>

Another key advantage of oral history is that it allows students with varying talents to see their place within the historical field. While many historical assignments require reading and writing skills, oral history provides a space for students with strong oral or interactive skills.<sup>29</sup> It also provides flexibility for students to find a project that truly appeals to them and aligns with their individual talents and interests. Educators can also see the value of oral history through its versatility for students of all ability levels and backgrounds. Specifically, oral history has been

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<sup>27</sup> Glenn Whitman, "Case Study: Oral History in the Classroom," in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, edited by Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger.

<sup>28</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> Crocco, "Putting the Actors Back on Stage," 20.

proven to improve the historical understanding and English skills of English Language Learners.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond benefits for individual students, it's also important to note that oral history projects benefit the community at large. Oral history projects can be archived and made available for public access. This increases the quantity of historical records by complementing existing historical records with orally communicated sources. It preserves history for the generations to come.<sup>31</sup> It can also provide a voice for traditionally underrepresented or marginalized groups.<sup>32</sup> Oral history interviews also benefit the community by creating intergenerational bridges between students and adults of the community.<sup>33</sup> These interviews remind both parties, the interviewee and the interviewer, that individuals shape history and their community.<sup>34</sup>

Oral history also provides students an opportunity to see those from their own community represented as historical actors. Educators must be sure to present students with opportunities that engage them with people from both similar and different cultures; this education principle is often called Windows and Mirrors. This pedagogy acknowledges that teachers are responsible to select class materials that represent diverse experiences, identities, and cultures.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, students grow in their understanding of diversity, relationship to their community, and local

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<sup>30</sup> Irma M. Olmedo, "Junior Historians: Doing Oral History with ESL and Bilingual Students," *TESOL Journal*, Summer 1993.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Dutt-Doner and Susan Allen, "Understanding the Impact of Using Oral Histories in the Classroom," *The Social Studies* 107, no. 6 (2016): 258.

<sup>32</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Lisa Buchanan, "On Windows and Mirrors in Teacher Education Program Materials: A Content Analysis of Human Demographics in One Picture Book Collection," *Multicultural Perspectives* 21, no. 4 (2019): 195.

historical understanding.<sup>36</sup> Oral history projects are an excellent opportunity to meet this goal.<sup>37</sup> At the elementary level specifically, students can interview community members such as police officers, firefighters, librarians, and public representatives to gain perspective about the lives of these community members. These personal connections can help young students see possible ways to serve their community in the future and helps students personalize civil servants.<sup>38</sup>

### **Educational Principles and Theories Supported by Oral History**

Oral history aligns with traditional educational theories, and these support its incorporation in elementary and middle school classrooms. For example, oral history meets the criteria required for an authentic assessment.<sup>39</sup> This means that oral history projects are realistic, include evaluation and innovation, require students to “do” history, replicate real-life historical study, assess students’ ability to use historical skills, require the completion of a complex task, and allows opportunities for feedback to refine the finished product. Authentic assessment goes beyond requiring students to pick the correct answers. It focuses on demonstrating knowledge of historical fact, student ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information, and communication of this knowledge to others.<sup>40</sup> A well-designed oral history project meets all of these requirements.

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<sup>36</sup> John F. Lyons, "Integrating the Family and the Community into the History Classroom: An Oral History Project in Joliet, Illinois," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 4 (2007): 485.

<sup>37</sup> Crocco, "Putting the Actors Back on Stage," 20.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Jenks, "Using Oral History in the Elementary School Classroom," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 23, no. 1 (2010): 32.

<sup>39</sup> Grant Wiggins, *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 31.

<sup>40</sup> Frederick D. Drake, "Using Alternative Assessment to Improve the Teaching and Learning of History," *Teacher Librarian* 28, no. 3 (2001): 32.

In addition, the five “dimensions of learning” are all implemented in oral history projects. The five “dimensions of learning” include “confidence and independence, skills and strategies, knowledge and understanding, use of prior and emerging experience, and reflection.”<sup>41</sup> Allowing students to take charge of their own oral history project allows for a great degree of independence and encourages students to gain confidence in their ability to complete quality and worthwhile historical study. Students gain competency in historical skills throughout the project and can be aided by the educator to refine their work. Students will grow in their knowledge and understanding of the historical period or event covered by the project, both through research preparation and through participation in the interview itself. Finally, a reflective element at the end of the presentation could and should be easily incorporated into the oral history project.

Oral history can also incorporate Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences.<sup>42</sup> For example, linguistic intelligence is used through pre-interview research, transcription creation, and the public presentation of oral history projects. Musical intelligence can be incorporated in the postproduction process as students edit their interview. Logical mathematical intelligence can be incorporated by emphasizing relationships and connections, as students develop interview questions that flow well and as they categorize the interview during the archiving process. Spatial intelligence can be engaged through postproduction editing, when students select images to complement the narration. Bodily kinesthetic is incorporated through the use of equipment and the recording process. Interpersonal intelligence is useful throughout the interviewing process as students must be fully aware, and respond to, the interviewee’s

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<sup>41</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Howard Gardner, "Taking a Multiple Intelligences (MI) Perspective," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 40, (2017): 2.

feelings, goals, and motivations. Intrapersonal intelligence can help as students follow their instincts and develop questions during the interview and as they personally connect with the history being discussed.

Additionally, oral history is an excellent way to incorporate multiple levels of Bloom's Taxonomy into classroom instruction.<sup>43</sup> Remembering specific historical facts and knowing the difference between "open" and "closed" questions allows students to operate at the knowledge level. Comprehension can be seen as students grasp the purpose of the interview and understand their conducted background research. Application is shown through the use of research to develop interview questions and through the use of class workshop information to communicate professionally with the interviewee. Analysis is evident as students reflect on the interview by examining the motivations, goals, emotions, and experiences of their interviewee. Synthesis is present by allowing students to practice combining their background knowledge on a subject with the new information presented during an oral history interview. This allows students to combine the written historical record with the new information obtained during an interview. Finally, evaluation is incorporated through final reflections that compare the interview to other historical sources for validity and value.

### **Objections to and Criticisms of Oral History**

While recognizing the numerous benefits of oral history, it is also important to recognize some of the objections that educators must overcome to use oral history projects effectively in the classroom. The four major objections against oral history are: "it takes too much time, costs

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<sup>43</sup> Nancy Adams, "Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Learning Objectives," *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 103, no. 3 (2015): 152.

too much money, is limited by one's geographic location, and requires special equipment.”<sup>44</sup> It is therefore important to address and refute each of these concerns.

A major objection to oral history implementation is the time commitment necessary for a full oral history project. In fact, in a survey of educators about oral history implementation, 69% of respondents reported that time was the “most substantial obstacle to classroom use.”<sup>45</sup> The major explanation for this critique is that time will be taken away from the classroom curriculum and students will fall behind on standardized testing. While oral history projects do take time, when properly designed and implemented, these projects can contribute tremendous educational value to students in line with the time commitment. Well-designed oral history projects can cover class content while also growing historical skills. For example, educators could use oral histories to cover key information about the Vietnam War or the fall of the Berlin Wall. While learning key class content, students would get the additional benefit of practicing communication, research, analysis, reflection, and other historical skills.

Another common objection is that oral history projects are expensive and require equipment. These two concerns are interlocked because the major expense of oral history is the purchase of equipment. Fortunately, the prevalence of technology has made oral history more feasible in the modern age than ever before. In an age where many adults and students have access to smartphones, if given no other option, students can still record oral history on these devices without any additional cost. Students can either film footage with cameras on smartphones or they can record voice memos on their devices. In addition, the prevalence of technology has brought down the cost of recording devices like a digital voice activated recorder.

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<sup>44</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

It is also important to note that teachers can often obtain help with these costs from oral history grants provided by organizations like the Oral History Association or the Library of Congress's Veteran History Program.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, a common objection to oral history is the idea that oral history is limited to one geographic location. This is a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of oral history. This may stem from the misconception that oral history means interviewing "important" people. In reality, interviewing less-famous individuals may hold more value as they preserve untold stories and connect with an individual from a student's own community.<sup>47</sup> This allows students to learn the value of uncovering history, rather than simply covering what has already been reported.<sup>48</sup> Overall, nearly everyone has lived through important historical events and oral history interviewees are available in all communities.

Beyond these four major objections, it is also important to note a few other popular criticisms to the use of oral history in the classroom. One is the argument that oral history interviews are uncontrollable and developmentally inappropriate information may arise. The nature of oral history does take away control of how information is presented to students. This requires a large degree of trust between the educator and the interviewee, as the interviewee will be given the power to shape the ideas and interpretations of the student surrounding the given period of history. While this is a legitimate concern, educators can prep students for this unexpected nature and allowing students to conduct pre-interview research can allow for a more

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<sup>46</sup> Library of Congress, "Veteran's History Project: About the Project," accessed December 29, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/vets/about.html>.

<sup>47</sup> James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2014), 26.

<sup>48</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 1.

well-rounded variety of sources surrounding the topic. In addition, educators can pre-approve the main questions in advance to center the interview around specific topics. Educators can also conduct debrief conversations with students after the interview to identify any areas of misinformation or address concerns. Another popular criticism is that textbooks do not supply flexibility for the implementation of oral history and teachers will have to do additional preparation to properly equip students for success in the project. Specifically, critics point to the lack of “pre-service teacher preparation programs, nor... any in-service training” programs to train teachers in preparing these projects.<sup>49</sup> Fortunately, there are a variety of resources available for teachers to gain training and assistance in oral history skills.

### **Resources and Implementation**

Teachers hoping to implement elements of oral history into their classrooms do not have to start this process alone; there are ample resources available to help teachers create excellent projects. One resource is the Oral History Association (OHA), which runs annual seminars geared specifically towards equipping teachers to train young oral historians. Teachers can also obtain professional training by attending seminars from the American Association for State and Local History, the American Folklife Society, or the Veteran’s History Project.<sup>50</sup> In addition, educators can consider allowing experts into their classrooms to help students workshop key oral history skills. For example, curators from local museums could talk to the class about research skills, telling stories, and ways to present their finished oral history interview.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Al-Rabaani, “Views of Omani Social Studies Teachers,” 60.

<sup>50</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> DeeDee Mower, “The Rose Creek Oral History Project: Elementary Cross-Grade Social Studies Curriculum in Review,” *Counterpoints* 449 (2014): 118.

Teachers can also use public resources to help access ready-made oral histories as well as publish and refine the work their students collect. One resource for the collection of stories is StoryCorps, which provides a database containing interviews from all backgrounds and eras.<sup>52</sup> StoryCorps also provides educational grants for recording equipment in classrooms. For teachers looking to add oral history interviews into their instruction, the Columbia Center for Oral History provides an online archive of over 8,000 interviews, all organized by subject and time period.<sup>53</sup> The Chicago History Museum allows for an example of oral history implemented to cover a wide range of historical topics in an engaging and creative way.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the Chicago History Museum's WFMT Oral History Archives are available online for public access. The Center for Digital Storytelling helps teachers learn to equip students, obtain recording equipment, and share recorded interviews.<sup>55</sup>

Given the numerous benefits of oral history in a classroom, educators should consider implementing oral history elements with their students. The structure of these projects is flexible and adaptable based on the needs of particular students, the grade level, the curriculum, and available resources. Oral history is a multistep process and must be approached strategically to give students the best chance of success and historical skill development.

From the start of the process, educators must assist elementary and middle school students in the process of selecting an appropriate interviewee and reaching out to potential interviewees. Depending on the time allotted for this project and the specific needs of the

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<sup>52</sup> StoryCorps, "StoryCorps Database," <https://storycorps.org/stories/>.

<sup>53</sup> Columbia University Libraries, "Oral History Archives," <https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/ccoh.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Chicago History Museum, "Exhibitions," <https://www.chicagohistory.org/exhibitions/>.

<sup>55</sup> StoryCenter, "Listen Deeply. Tell Stories," <https://www.storycenter.org/>.

curriculum, students can interview family members or non-family members. Although family members may be easier to arrange, research does suggest that there may be more value in social development from interviewing nonfamily members.<sup>56</sup> For educators looking to implement family interviews, elementary schoolers could benefit from interviewing grandparents and then developing a Coat of Arms based on their family history and values.<sup>57</sup> It is crucial to teach students how to properly interact with their interviewee. This includes coaching students on etiquette by reviewing how to request an interview, how to confirm an interview beforehand, and how to send a follow-up thank you and finished transcription of the interview. Students should be encouraged to contact multiple potential interviewees in case one says no.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, students must be courteous and clearly define their purpose and expectations to a potential interviewee. These are key life skills that will benefit students beyond the scope of the social studies classroom.<sup>59</sup> Students, specifically at the elementary level, may be nervous to contact potential interviewees, yet they can be reminded that many people will be interested in the project and that the worst answer they can receive is no.

To identify interviewees, students can reach out to local retirement communities or advertise by word of mouth. In addition, the educator can build a preapproved list of potential interviewees. A preapproved list may be especially important at the elementary level, where subject matter must be carefully monitored. When an interviewee has been selected, students should work to build a rapport with the interviewee before the interview date. This can take the

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<sup>56</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 56.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>58</sup> Mayotte and Eggers, *The Power of Story*, 108.

<sup>59</sup> Crocco, "Putting the Actors Back on Stage," 21.

form of emails, phone calls, or even sharing a meal before the recorded interview. This can give students a better idea of the possible topics of conversation to approach and can ease the nerves of both parties.<sup>60</sup> For younger students or those who are particularly nervous about the interview, educators could also allow for students to partner with an older student who has completed an oral history project in the past. This would allow for students to collaborate, learn from experience, and feel more comfortable in the interview setting.<sup>61</sup>

Once students select an appropriate interviewee they must begin preparing for the interview. First, students must conduct background research on the historical event that will be discussed during the interview. Students should be sure to research about the general subject, review any written work by the interviewee, and read sources that will help them understand and formulate questions.<sup>62</sup> Students should also be encouraged to conduct background research on the political, social, and economic context surrounding the historical event to be discussed.<sup>63</sup>

Next, it's important to prepare students on how to ask questions. This involves both preparing possible questions based on background research and asking effective questions based on the conversation during the interview. Oral history research suggests that effective questions are short and open-ended, usually focusing on a topic rather than specifics.<sup>64</sup> One way to guide students in creating effective questions is to practice with an inquiry arc that allows students to

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<sup>60</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 43.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Brooks, "Long, Long Ago: Recipe for a Middle School Oral History Program," *OAH Magazine of History*, Spring 1997, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Richie Donald, *Doing Oral History: Using Interviews to Uncover the Past and Preserve it for the Future*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 66.

<sup>63</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> Crocco, "Putting the Actors Back on Stage," 21.

develop a set of questions on a particular topic and respond to their own curiosities. This also allows students to practice thinking on their feet to develop questions, which will be necessary due to the unpredictable nature of oral history interviews.<sup>65</sup> Students should be prepared with more questions than they think will be necessary as it is better to have too many questions than to fall short.<sup>66</sup> Many oral historians have found that some structures for questions tend to provide more detail and lead to more fruitful conversation. For elementary students, effective questions might take the form of “walk-me-through-a-typical day,” questions about specific experiences, or “can you please share your thoughts on” questions.<sup>67</sup> At the middle school level, students can wrestle with the content at a deeper level by asking “help-me-understand” questions, comparing and contrasting questions, and follow-up questions.<sup>68</sup> Regardless of student grade level, questions must be respectful and honor the individual being interviewed.<sup>69</sup>

In an elementary classroom, it can be a good idea to teach students about “open” and “closed” questions as they prepare interview questions. One way to teach this is to use literature. A read aloud of a book such as *The Girl with Big, Big Questions* by Brittney Winn Lee, can help students focus on developing questions.<sup>70</sup> The educator can then help students recognize what kinds of questions lead to more discussion. Some questions in the book may result in one-word answers, while others take a long time to answer. Students can then practice developing “open”

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<sup>65</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Donald, *Doing Oral History*, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 311.

<sup>68</sup> Donald, *Doing Oral History*, 81.

<sup>69</sup> Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 311.

<sup>70</sup> Brittney Lee, *The Girl with Big, Big Questions* (Minneapolis: Beaming Books, 2021), 14.

questions that require longer answers and can be encouraged to use these within their oral history interview.

In a middle school setting, this same concept can be taught in a more advanced manner. One way to present this is to have students develop two questions they would like to ask the teacher. Without explaining that the teacher is looking for “open” questions, have students ask the questions aloud. The teacher will place an “X” on a scoreboard displayed in front of the class for each “open” question that is asked. The teacher will explain that students should work together to score 20 points within five minutes of asking questions. Students will have to use trial and error to determine the types of questions that are awarded an “X” on the board. This will allow students to explore, think critically, and ultimately gain practice in creating “open questions.”<sup>71</sup>

Students should also receive guidance in how to properly use all recording equipment. Unfortunately, improper use of recording equipment can result in lost historical records and second round interviews may not be an option for many busy interviewees. It is crucial that students learn to properly use the recording equipment. One way this can be done is through mock interviews between students. During these mock interviews, students can rehearse starting, pausing, and stopping all recording equipment. These workshops will help students feel comfortable with the equipment aspect of the upcoming interviews. At the elementary level, it may be helpful to also train adult volunteers who will sit in on the interview. It is important to note that interviews should be preserved in multiple formats to ensure preservation. Many oral history agencies suggest both a video and transcription preservation strategy.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 120.

<sup>72</sup> Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 315.

When students complete an oral history project, it is crucial that these works are preserved and made available for public access. This allows students to see how their research and works are contributing to the historical record. It also preserves important stories for future generations. One way to do this is to submit video files, audio files, or transcripts to the Library of Congress Veterans History Project.<sup>73</sup> This will allow students' work to be accessed by anyone on the Library of Congress website.<sup>74</sup> This database can be used for interviews with any community member, not just American service members.

Upon completing an oral history interview, students must be given time to reflect on their experiences. One beneficial way for reflection is to encourage students to compare and contrast coverage of historical events from textbooks and the oral history interview.<sup>75</sup> At the middle school level, this can open the dialogue about periodization, historical simplification, bias, or other key historical skills. They should reflect on how their interview fits into traditional historical contextualization and how it fits into or goes against traditional understanding of the historical past. They should also reflect on the bias present within their interview and the degree by which this may have affected the historical interpretation. Students can compare how their interview aligns with the research they conducted prior to the interview.<sup>76</sup>

It is also important that teachers ensure that ethical guidelines are considered and followed by students throughout the oral history process. Specifically, students must make sure

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<sup>73</sup> Library of Congress, "Veteran's History Project," <https://www.loc.gov/vets/about.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Dutt-Doner and Allen, "Understanding the Impact of Using Oral Histories," 260.

<sup>75</sup> Crocco, "Putting the Actors Back on Stage," 19.

<sup>76</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 9.

that interviewees are willfully participating in the interview.<sup>77</sup> It is never okay to coerce, misidentify intentions, or plead with interviewees.<sup>78</sup> In addition, all interviewees must read and sign a release for their interview.<sup>79</sup> Many oral history programs recommend that students film the interviewee reading the release aloud and obtain their signature on a release form. A release form covers liabilities for publication, editing, and recording the interview.<sup>80</sup> Another important ethical consideration is the selection of appropriate interviewees for students. It may be a good idea to require that students bring along an adult, such as a trusted guardian, to the interview. Alternatives to this requirement are to have students select interviewees from a preapproved list of volunteers with background checks or to hold interviews at the school where an educator can also be in attendance.

For teachers not ready to implement the collection of oral history into their instruction, there are additional options to incorporate oral history elements within a classroom. One option is to use “ready-made” oral histories alongside instruction. Using premade oral histories allows students to experience human connection with historical study. One example of ready-made history is the collection of slave narratives from the Federal Writer’s Project.<sup>81</sup> Another option for integration is to require oral history elements alongside participation in National History Day (NHD). NHD is a research competition for middle school students that encourages students to

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<sup>77</sup> Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 129.

<sup>78</sup> Mayotte and Eggers, *The Power of Story*, 106.

<sup>79</sup> Donald, *Doing Oral History*, 273.

<sup>80</sup> Mayotte and Eggers, *The Power of Story*, 106.

<sup>81</sup> James W. Davidson, and Mark H. Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 16.

develop websites, research papers, or creative art responses about a specific topic related to a yearly theme. Nearly half of NHD projects incorporate an aspect of oral history, and the flexibility of the project could allow higher percentages to consider its incorporation.<sup>82</sup>

### **Case Study**

There is precedent for the incorporation of oral history into elementary and middle school classrooms. Dr. Matthew Fash has worked to develop an oral history program in the middle schools of Central Bucks School District (CBSD). These programs grew out of the pilot school Lenape Middle School and promptly spread to other middle and high schools throughout the country. The intention behind this program, called the Veteran Oral History Project, was to use students interested in history to identify, record, and preserve community stories. Students at Lenape Middle School have interviewed and preserved over 500 hours of historical interviews over the last decade.<sup>83</sup> Growing out of this project, the CBSD curriculum has also expanded to require an oral history interview for all eighth-grade students. As part of this project, students interview and record a fifteen-to-twenty-minute oral history about a specific historical event. Students must then preserve the interview through a transcription and upload the video onto an online database for public access. Students also reflect on the interview through a class presentation covering the key things they learned, what diverged from class lectures, and other impactful takeaways from the experience.

Reflecting on the impact of this program on students, Dr. Fash noted the opportunities that it provides for students. They develop cultural awareness, academic skills, historical expertise, make important community connections, and open doors for themselves

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<sup>82</sup> Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past*, 29.

<sup>83</sup> Dr. Matthew Fash, interview by author, Doylestown, PA, October 15, 2021.

professionally. Graduates out of Dr. Fash's program alone have gone on to work for the Library of Congress, the National Archives, various congressmen, been elected to public office, and have become educators themselves. The program, and the skills that it fostered, set students up with a love for history and the skills to pursue successful careers in the field.

Drawing upon his experience, Dr. Fash provided a few personal recommendations for educators looking at adding oral history into their classroom. For educators building an extracurricular oral history program, he recommends that teachers find a few students who are deeply interested in the subject area and passionate about interviewing as many community members as possible. He recommends filming interviews and following up with a transcript, when possible, but prioritizing obtaining interviews while aging veterans are still available. For educators looking to integrate oral history into the classroom, he recommends allowing students to access the oral history databases themselves and become familiar with how to access these resources without a teacher. For elementary students, he recommends shorter, engaging snippets selected from longer interviews. Dr. Fash also discusses the importance of timely incorporation of oral history media into the classroom, as students entering elementary and middle school are part of the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner" group (students born after the year 2000).<sup>84</sup> He cited research that supports the importance of incorporating media into the classroom, as textbooks present a "media desert" of information to a generation used to nearly constant technological stimulation.<sup>85</sup>

Dr. Fash examines this practice through his own dissertation study, as he investigated "To what extent do teachers perceive an increase in student learning through the use of digitized

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<sup>84</sup> Dr. Matthew Fash, interview by author, Doylestown, PA, October 15, 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Samuel Johnson, "Effectively Using Presentation Technology in the History Classroom," (*Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Scholar Works*, 2011), 28.

veteran histories compared to learning through traditional means of instruction within a secondary social studies classroom?”<sup>86</sup> To explore this question, Dr. Fash developed a quantitative study which collected data from 50 educators, with 32 in high school and 18 in a middle school setting. Overwhelmingly, based on a Likert scale, educators who added oral history interviews into their classroom saw the value of it, witnessed increased student comprehension of the content area, and expressed confidence they would incorporate the veteran interviews again in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Oral history in the classroom involves the addition of first-hand accounts and memories in educational instruction. Educators can utilize ready-made accounts or engage students in the oral history process by preserving new interviews. No matter the form of project, the incorporation of oral history in the classroom is research-backed and adaptable for elementary and middle school students. As shown through existing research and Dr. Fash’s work at CBSD, oral history is suitably flexible to meet the needs of students, the demands of a curriculum, and the resources available for educators. Overall, oral history’s proven benefits and seemingly endless incorporation options make it a valuable choice to add to the elementary and middle school classroom.

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<sup>86</sup> Matthew Fash, *Utilizing Veteran Histories to Enhance the Learning Process* (Gwynedd Valley, PA: Gwynedd Mercy University, 2017), 1.

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