

How Students Navigate the Construction of Heritage Narratives

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## **Dedication**

For my Pere, who taught me to keep asking questions.

## **Abstract**

This qualitative study (n=17) uses a multiple case studies design to interrogate how and why students understand events contained within “heritage histories.” By this I mean that the students are too young to have been involved in the events, but that their parents, grandparents, other family members, or other members of an affinity group (racial, ethnic, national, religious) to which they belong were involved. Prior research (e.g., An, 2009; Epstein, 1998, 2000, 2009; Peck, 2010; Wills, 1996) has demonstrated that students’ racial, religious, ethnic, national, and socioeconomic class backgrounds impact and influence students’ historical thinking, yet, as Barton (2008) astutely notes, “much more research is needed to illustrate the specific ways in which students of given backgrounds learn history both in and out of school” (p. 250). Therefore, I focused on the ways that three selected heritage groups learned about specific and meaningful heritage events in and out of their public school history classrooms: four Hmong students in St. Paul, Minnesota studying the Vietnam War; eight Chinese students in Los Angeles, California studying the Cultural Revolution; and five Jewish students in Chicago, Illinois studying the Holocaust.

Through this work, I show that the students engaged in complex historical thinking as they worked to make sense of histories to which they all felt some degree of a heritage connection. While several of the students learned information at school that was dissimilar to what they had learned at home, they were able to critically evaluate both sources and develop narratives that incorporated the first and secondhand accounts of the past they had heard from their families with the official knowledge presented in their

public school history classrooms. Additionally, by including these heritage histories in their curricula, the three teachers worked to also include their students' histories within the official knowledge of the classrooms. In so doing, the teachers sent a message to their students that the students' families' pasts are part of a history that has relevance and import beyond the three heritage communities; which tells the students that they, too, are important, relevant, valued members of the classroom communities and society in general.

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## **Introduction**

“Are you Jewish?” The first time a student asked me this question, I’m sure she could read the surprise on my face. I recovered and responded in the affirmative, and watched the student’s face to see if this was the answer she was expecting. It seemed that it was – the look on her face said to me “ok, this makes sense now.” I had spoken to the student’s class as part of my work with a Holocaust studies program. Although I was caught off guard the first time a student asked this question, I soon came to expect it. The students almost always spoke in a low, shy voice. Sometimes, it was prefaced with “I don’t mean to be offensive or anything, but...” Each time, the fact of my Jewishness seemed to answer the question the students were really asking – “What connection do you have to this thing that happened forever ago? Why does it matter to you?” To them, my interest in the Holocaust stemmed from my Jewish identity and explained my interest in the subject.

To be honest, I know that my interest in the Holocaust cannot be separated from my identity as a Jew. This does not mean, however, that all Jews feel the same connection to this event. Nor is this connection static or fixed; the ways in which my Jewishness inform and structure my interest in and knowledge of the Holocaust have changed and shifted over the past twenty years. From reading historical fiction and memoirs as a teenager, to engaging in more formal academic studies during my undergraduate and graduate years, to working with students and teachers as a Holocaust educator, I have always been aware that the connection I feel to this event stems in part from being a Jew. I began to question how my identity as a Jew could still impact my

connection to the Holocaust, given my temporal and physical distance from the event. The changing, dynamic nature of the connection between individuals and their heritage histories, and the way this connection impacts our unique and personal understandings of history, is what drives this study.

Moving beyond the Holocaust-Jewish heritage connection, I started wondering about the students who were asking me this question. How do students in public schools understand the narratives of those events with which they have a *heritage connection*? By this I mean that the students are too young to have been involved in the events, but that their parents, grandparents, other family members, or other members of an affinity group (racial, ethnic, national, religious) to which they belong were involved. In this way, the students' *heritage connections* stem from their shared identity as members of the affinity groups. In particular, I am interested in events which hold defining moments for that group and have become cemented in the groups' heritages. Understanding the way students mediate the relationship between history and heritage in and out of the classroom is a complex undertaking which necessitates an investigation of the multiple contexts and influences in and with which students construct the past.

My own curiosity, however, was not reason enough to embark on this project. Prior research (e.g., An, 2009; Epstein, 1998, 2000, 2009; Peck, 2010; Wills, 1996) has demonstrated that students' racial, religious, ethnic, national, and socioeconomic class backgrounds impact and influence students' historical thinking. Barton (2008) astutely notes that "much more research is needed to illustrate the specific ways in which students of given backgrounds learn history both in and out of school" (p. 250). With this in

mind, I created a research project that would look exactly at the intersection of histories learned at home and histories learned at school. I focused on the ways that three selected heritage groups learned about specific and meaningful heritage events in and out of their public school history classrooms: Hmong students in St. Paul, Minnesota studying the Vietnam War; Chinese students in Los Angeles, California studying the Cultural Revolution; and Jewish students in Chicago, Illinois studying the Holocaust.

Wertsch's (1998) conception of sociocultural analysis helps to ground this study: "[T]he task of a sociocultural approach is to explicate the relationships between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which this action occurs, on the other" (p. 24). This is to say, no conversation occurs in a vacuum. Every conversation is formed not only by the people participating in that conversation, but also by the contexts and history which have led up to it. Wertsch's ideas are particularly relevant to this dissertation because the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which the chosen events are situated are complex and multi-layered. We know that students are not blank slates, but that instead they come to the classroom with a wealth of experiences and opinions. Therefore, this study acknowledged and investigated the importance and role of the multiple contexts (e.g., school, culture, gender, peer relationships) in and from which students construct historical understandings.

### **Research Design, Terminology, and Format**

The purpose of this research study was to examine the ways in which public school students construct narratives about defining events with which they have specific

heritage connections. Working with three groups of students studying three specific heritage events, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What narratives do students construct about significant events with which they have a heritage connection?
  - a. What meaning do students attach to events with which they have a heritage connection?
  - b. What reasons do students give for constructing their narratives?
  - c. Who influences students in their narrative constructions?
2. What sources do students trust in the construction of these narratives?
  - a. Why do students trust these sources?
  - b. Do students with different heritage connections trust the same types of sources (e.g., family, school, media, friends)?

I used qualitative research methods, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, to explore and consider the students' narrative constructions in light of the multiple contexts in which they were functioning. Data collection and analysis were based in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), because the primary goal of the research was to develop an understanding of how students mediate the various stories they hear about the past. This methodology allowed me to examine and compare students' historical understanding by interrogating the narratives they constructed about the topics at hand. I focused on students who have heritage connections to the subjects of study. This methodology allowed me to gain insight into the ways in which students

interacted with and made meaning from the available “‘stock[s] of stories’ (MacIntyre, 1984)” (Wertsch, 1998, p. 100).

The three primary contexts in which I worked were the three classrooms in which units about the heritage events were taught. I also considered the students’ homes and families as sites of learning about the heritage events. In the spring semester of 2011 (January – May), I collected data with the three groups of students previously mentioned. I conducted two interviews with each of the participating students, as well as one interview each with their parents and history teachers. I also observed their classes while they were learning about the heritage events in school and collected documents (e.g., essays, study guides, notes) related to the units about the heritage events. I worked with four Hmong students learning about the Vietnam War in St. Paul, MN, eight Chinese students learning about the Cultural Revolution in Los Angeles, CA, and five Jewish students learning about the Holocaust in Chicago, IL.

### **Overview of Terminology**

Throughout this manuscript, I use two terms that merit explanation, as they are central ideas to many aspects of this project. Here, I give a brief background of these terms and describe their use in the rest of the manuscript.

**Official knowledge.** Official knowledge is comprised of the stories, narratives, themes, and lessons given voice and power in textbooks, national and state educational standards, and classrooms (Apple, 2000). For the purposes of this dissertation, I refer to official knowledge or official history as the history taught by the three teachers about the three heritage events. This includes the lectures, textbook readings, homework

assignments, and any other parts of curricula assigned to the students by the teachers. I provide much more detailed accounts of these curricula in each of the findings chapters. *By including these histories in their classrooms through the use of these curricular and pedagogical tools, the three teachers have codified parts of the heritage events within the official knowledge of their classrooms.* I explore how the placement of the three heritage events in public school curricula impacted and affected the students in this study.

**Heritage.** Heritage refers to the various means by which groups of people organize and remember their collective pasts. Heritage may consist of stories, artifacts, rituals, etc, that are specific and meaningful to a group of people bound by a shared trait, characteristic, or identifier such as ethnicity, religion, or nationality. Heritage is often employed as a means of both remembering this shared or collective past, and using it to making sense of the present: “Legends of origin and endurance, of victory or victimization, project the present back, the past forward, aligning us with forebears whose virtues we share but whose vices we shun” (Lowenthal, 1997, p. 35). For the purposes of this dissertation, I refer to the specific heritage stories told by the three focal groups; the story of the Vietnam War as told by Hmong people in St. Paul, California, the story of the Cultural Revolution as told by Chinese people in Los Angeles, and the story of the Holocaust as told by Jewish people in Chicago. Just as the three teachers are purveyors of official knowledge in the classroom, the parents, grandparents, and other community members of these three groups of students are the purveyors of heritage. I explore how the focal students understand these heritage histories, and how they make sense of them in light of the official knowledge they learn in school.



## **Dissertation Format**

The format of the dissertation reflects the data collection process. Chapter Two is a review of literature divided into three sections: theoretical conceptions of narrative, theories of collective memory and heritage, and the current literature about students' historical understanding. Chapter Three describes the design and methodology of this study in greater detail. Chapters 4-6 each present the findings of one case, including an overview of the school setting and classroom contexts, previous literature relating specifically to students learning about the heritage events, and profiles of the student participants. The three findings chapters are organized chronologically according to the order in which data was collected. Therefore, Chapter Four examines the narrative constructions of the Hmong students about the Vietnam War, Chapter Five does the same for the Chinese students and the Cultural Revolution, and Chapter Six for the Jewish students and the Holocaust. Chapter Seven looks across the three cases and examines enduring themes that were identified by students in two or three cases, as well as themes that were unique to the specific cases. Chapter Eight provides concluding thoughts, implications of the findings presented in earlier chapters, and ideas for further research.

Through this work, I show that the students engaged in complex historical thinking as they worked to make sense of histories to which they all felt some degree of a heritage connection. While several of the students learned information at school that was dissimilar to what they had learned at home, they were able to critically evaluate both sources and develop narratives that incorporated the first and secondhand accounts of the past they had heard from their families with the official knowledge presented in their

public school history classrooms. Additionally, by including these heritage histories in their curricula, the three teachers worked to also include their students' histories within the official knowledge of the classrooms. In so doing, the teachers sent a message to their students that the students' families' pasts are part of a history that has relevance and import beyond the three heritage communities; which tells the students that they, too, are important, relevant, valued members of the classroom communities and society in general.

## **Review of the Literature**

In this chapter, I review literature related to three specific areas of inquiry: theoretical conceptions of narrative, heritage and collective memory, and students' historical understanding.

### **Theoretical Conceptions of Narrative**

As explained in the introductory chapter, I use a sociocultural approach to understand how and why students make sense of heritage histories. I chose this approach because there are many factors which influence students' understanding and sense-making of the past – they do not come to know or understand history without considering the words and ideas of others. The acts of historical thinking and understanding are necessarily undertaken in partnership with other people, voices, and ideas. Therefore, the conception of narrative that frames this analysis is derived from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and James Wertsch. These theorists posit that narratives are constructed in conversation with stories told by others, and that a person's words and ideas can never truly be her own – they must be derived, in some way, from other sources.

In his analysis of Dostoevsky's literature, Bakhtin lays out his theory of "polyphony" or "multivoicedness." This is the idea that, when speaking, a person uses the voices, ideas, or words of other people. Importantly, Bakhtin explains his conception of "double-directed" discourse as "incorporating a relationship to someone else's utterance" (1984, p. 185). In this study, the narratives constructed by the students necessarily include stories they have heard from family members, teachers, community members, books, movies, and friends; therefore, they are multivoiced. Bakhtin notes:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention (1981, p. 293-294).

Here, Bakhtin explains the idea that, when imbuing someone else's words with a particular meaning and intent, the speaker makes those words her own. Therefore, it is in the speaking and appropriation of others' words that the speaker creates her own, specific meanings and interpretations of the words – and subsequently the object of the words, as well. Bakhtin goes on to explain:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process (1981, p. 294).

The undertaking of appropriating someone else's words as one's own is made even more complex when considering the attendant power structures. As both Bakhtin and Wertsch elucidate, the power of the original speaker also influences the appropriation of words. When discussing power, Bakhtin (1981) offers two conceptions of discourse: "authoritative" and "internally persuasive" (p. 342). In the first, he envisions a discourse which derives power from an external force – such as a teacher or parent. This discourse is immutable – it cannot be altered or modified in any way. Internally persuasive

discourses, on the other hand, are constantly changing, shifting, and reconstituting themselves as people learn new ideas and information. Unlike authoritative discourses, which can only be appropriated or rejected, internally persuasive discourses allow for integration and modification of external discourses. As the internally persuasive discourse is in constant conversation with other discourses, it becomes “half-ours and half-someone else’s” (p. 345). It is this type of discourse which will be examined in this study, as the speakers (students) are presumably exposed to at least two discourses – those told by their teachers/schools and those told by their parents/families – which may or may not contradict each other. It is likely that the students will have existing internally persuasive discourses regarding the heritage events prior to entering their history classes. There are likely other discourses to which the students have access as well, possibly from books, movies, and the internet. Therefore, they must decide how to integrate these multiple discourses into their existing internally persuasive discourse. However, each student will hold the different discourses with differing levels of esteem and authority; no two students’ internally persuasive discourses will be the same.

This point is particularly relevant to the present study because the words that the speakers (students) are using presumably derive from the words they have heard from sources with considerable power (parents and teachers). Therefore, the language that the students choose to use to discuss the heritage events is populated by not only the intentions of others, but with the intentions of very powerful others. Therefore, the process in which the students engage as they appropriate these words is, as Bakhtin notes, “difficult and complicated.”

Sociocultural theorist James Wertsch relies heavily on Bakhtin in his explication of historical understanding through a sociocultural lens. Wertsch expands on Bakhtin's work by applying Bakhtin's ideas – developed as literary criticism – in his own psychological research. In *Voices of the Mind* (1991), Wertsch demonstrates the importance of considering not the literal meaning of a speaker's words, but the dialogicality of those words – how those words are used in dialogue with oneself or another. Wertsch's analysis of a child's words in relation to the words he heard spoken by his mother demonstrates how a child will incorporate and appropriate his parent's words to express his own ideas. This shows how dialogic discourse can result in the appropriation of an external discourse into an internally persuasive discourse.

Importantly, Wertsch also introduces the idea that historical, cultural, and institutional contexts can influence discourse:

...mediated action is inextricably linked to historical, cultural, and institutional settings, and that the social origins of individual mental functioning extend beyond the level of intermental functioning. Because utterances inevitably invoke a speech genre, it is no longer possible to view dialogue in terms of two localized voices. (Wertsch, 1991, p. 144).

Here, Wertsch explains how he sees the intersection of people, discourse, and context inextricably acting together to create meaning. As no human action or discourse takes place in a vacuum, it is imperative that the contexts which influence both people and discourses are considered when making meaning of people's spoken words. Wertsch also argues that, because discourse is influenced by so many contextual and

psychological factors, it cannot be seen merely as the conversation between two people. It must be seen as part of a larger discourse.

### **Heritage and Collective Memory**

Collective memory provides a clear and cohesive story which can be passed from one generation to the next about the important moments, people, and places of any society (Halbwachs, 1952/1992; Wertsch, 2002), and is often specific to one particular ethnic, national, or religious group. Another way to look at the memories formed between and about members of a particular group is through the lens of heritage. Heritage, in the words of Lowenthal, “starts with what individuals inherit and bequeath” (1998, p. 31). However, heritage – the passing down of stories, mementos, legends, pictures, and other pieces of the past in order to not only preserve memories of the past but also to shape the way those pieces are interpreted by people in the present and future – can also be collective. In this way, different groups – based not only on ethnic or racial identification, but extending to any way in which we join together, including politics, trades, common interests – collectively engage in creating and disseminating their heritage not only to members of the group, but to other members of society as well (Lowenthal, 1998).

As Levisohn (2004) explains, heritage is “selective, uncritical, and...generated by the group to serve some purpose” (p. 4). Similarly, Kammen (1991) notes: “Heritage is something that suffuses us with pride rather than shame” (in Boym, 2011, p. 453). In other words, heritage is one mechanism by which a group of people can generate feelings of pride, connection, and belonging around a shared past, no matter how painful or

violent that past may have been. The emotions generated by heritage need not be directly related to critical thinking or even-handed evaluation. Heritage does not demand factual accuracy – heritage and collective memory are more concerned with creating a clear, linear story than with ensuring historical accuracy.

For this reason, heritage and collective memory are sometimes positioned in opposition to history (Wertsch, 2002; Nora, 1989; Novick, 1999):

To understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, of protagonists' motives and behavior. Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective, is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes. (Novick, 1999, p. 3-4)

Lowenthal characterizes the relationship between heritage and history similarly:

History tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing a select group with prestige and common purpose. History is enlarged by being disseminated; heritage is diminished and despoiled by export. (Lowenthal, 1998, p. 128)

Both Lowenthal and Novick clearly distinguish between history and heritage, and Lowenthal's point that heritage belongs to "select groups" is particularly relevant to this study. Heritage belongs to a particular group and is a way in which a group can sustain itself through generations. History, on the other hand, belongs to a multitude of groups.



While a heritage story about a particular event, such as the Great Famine in Ireland, passes a particular viewpoint and understanding of that event down through generations to members of the group who experienced it, the history of that event would allow for multiple perspectives in the recounting of the event. To continue with the Great Famine example, people of Irish descent might tell a specific story of deliberate neglect by the British government that directly led to the deaths of approximately one million Irish people. Historians, however, may examine and evaluate the decisions made by the British government in a more measured and critical fashion. While both heritage and history would acknowledge the lasting impact of the famine on Ireland and Irish people, the heritage story would likely be more linear, simplistic, and focused on the impact of the famine on Irish people. The historical story would be more focused on an empirical analysis of available documents and artifacts in order to develop a more nuanced and complex narrative. The present study seeks to develop an understanding of how students make sense of the past when they must contend with both history and heritage.

Létourneau and Moisan (2004) endeavored to discover how, when, and why young French Quebecers of French-Canadian heritage encounter and appropriate the mainstream narrative about Quebec's past. The authors posit that young people exhibit "a melancholy, nostalgic awareness centering on the idea, the concept, of a conquered, reclusive people, abused by others and always fearful of reclaiming their destiny" (p. 116). They argue that young people are first exposed to this collective memory by their families and communities as children, and that the frameworks developed during this time – which are grounded in heritage stories – endure as students are introduced to new

information throughout their school experiences. They review the other places students may learn this history – secondary school, college, and university – and surmise that the childhood frameworks can only be altered or disrupted through careful and intentional work by teachers and will likely only happen at the university level. The authors conclude that the collective memory passed on to children by their families and communities is very strong and durable, and is not easily unseated. In other words, these authors posit that heritage stories are stronger than historical inquiry in the development of students’ understandings of the past.

### **Students’ Historical Thinking, Understanding, and Empathy**

Students’ interactions with history have been conceptualized through a variety of lenses. There are those who have looked specifically at students’ historical thinking (VanSledright, 2002), historical understanding (Seixas, 1993), and historical empathy (Foster & Yeager, 1998). These conceptualizations are necessarily interrelated, as elucidated by Grant (2001). Their commonalities involve asking students to interrogate multiple sources, question bias and authorship, and consider multiple sources in the pursuit of a full and complex interpretation of history. For the purposes of this study, I use the term “students’ historical understanding” to encompass these various conceptions of students’ meaning-making of the past. Further research has complicated the ways in which we view students’ interactions with history by investigating how the racial, ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds of students impact these interactions (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998, 2000; Schweber, 2008; Wills, 1996), as well as the myriad contexts (home, school, community, media) in which these interactions occur (Wineburg,

2000, 2001). These studies have revealed the importance of considering students' backgrounds when looking at their interpretations of U.S. history. However, there has been little work which examines how students' backgrounds impact their understanding of global or world histories.

**Students' constructions of historical narratives.** Research which examines and uncovers the way students construct and understand the narratives of different nations has focused primarily on the U.S. narrative. There is also a body of research which examines the narratives students in other countries construct about their nations' pasts. Both bodies of research demonstrate the complicated and often veiled work students must do in order to create for themselves an understanding of the past that is meaningful and relevant.

*Students' construction of the U.S. narrative.* The U.S. narrative is well-documented as being focused on progress, with a continuous quest for freedom and equality. VanSledright's (2008) review of research investigating the way U.S. history is shaped and taught in public school classrooms examined both the role of textbooks in the U.S. classroom and the available empirical research about U.S. history teaching and learning. VanSledright demonstrates that a "triumphal national narrative" (p. 137) is the centerpiece of history education in the United States. He argues that the transmission of this narrative in public school classrooms perpetuates the handing down of a specific and exclusive heritage, and therefore precludes students from truly engaging in inquiry about the past.

Barton and Levstik have examined, individually and together, the role of narrative in history teaching and learning (Barton and Levstik, 1998, 2004; Barton 1997, 2001;

Levstik 1986, 1995). They have used a variety of qualitative research methods (e.g., interviews, photo elicitation exercises, and participant-observation), to demonstrate the powerful structure that narratives provide both teachers and students in the United States as they seek to frame and make sense of the past. Additionally, they compellingly argue that the overarching narrative of U.S. history is one of “progress and freedom” (2004, p. 167) and underscore how students frame complex issues, such as persistent racial and class-based inequalities, in a way that supports the primary narrative. Instead of seeing persistent inequality as evidence that the narrative is flawed, Barton and Levstik theorize that students see these issues as evidence that freedom for all can be found, citing events and people such as the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Wertsch and O’Connor (1994) conducted a study of essays written by 25 college students about the origins of the United States. The students focused on the colonization of the United States and the American Revolution. Similar to Barton and Levstik, the students in the Wertsch and O’Connor study integrated the oppression of Native Americans by Europeans into the “progress and freedom” narrative by acknowledging the oppression of the Native Americans by the European settlers while implying that this oppression was an unfortunate but necessary part of U.S. history.

Wineburg and Monte-Sano (2008) asked two thousand U.S. high school students to list the most famous Americans *without* naming presidents. Four of the ten most frequently named people were African American: Martin Luther King, Jr, Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman and Oprah Winfrey. In their analysis of the students’ responses, Wineburg and Monte-Sano (2008) argue that the U.S. narrative of “progress and

freedom” has come to include a quest for equality. The authors optimistically suggest that the students’ apparent establishment of the civil rights narrative within the accepted “progress and freedom” narrative signifies an acceptance of this story as part of “who we are... and perhaps whom we aspire to become” (p. 648). However, it is also possible that the students’ inclusion of a quest for equality in the broader “progress and freedom” narrative demonstrates their inability to think outside the parameters of this established narrative.

Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, and Duncan (2007) conducted a qualitative study which examined how fifteen young people and their families thought about the Vietnam War. Four of the participating families were headed by at least one parent born outside the United States. One family identified as African American, one as Native American, and one as Asian American; the remaining twelve families identified as Caucasian. The authors found that several forces, including collective memory and a “cultural curriculum,” outside of the students’ schools influenced their understanding of the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War. Though the students in this study had been told different stories about this history by their parents and attended different schools, they all constructed remarkably similar narratives about the Vietnam War. Wineburg et al. attribute this phenomenon to the power of media and other aspects of a “cultural curriculum.” This study highlights the important role that families, communities, and media play in shaping students’ narratives about specific events.

John Wills’ (2011) study, which examines how schematic narrative templates may aid in students’ misremembering of history, provides insights into how students’

prior historical knowledge or understanding influences their ability to accommodate new or conflicting information into their existing narratives. Wills used a qualitative case study design to research students in two fifth grade classrooms and one fourth grade classroom. Data collection involved the videotaping of almost every social studies lesson in each classroom for one academic year, interviews with the teachers and principals, student focus groups, and document analysis. In an attempt to understand why students were narrating history in ways that glossed over or ignored significant pieces of information presented in the classrooms, Wills concluded that the students may be using existing narrative templates to make sense of what they were learning. Wills argues that the templates were so strong that students were unable to accommodate new knowledge, even if it did not directly conflict with what they already knew.

*Students' constructions of global narratives.* There is a growing body of research which examines students' constructions of national narratives outside of the United States. Barton has done extensive research with students in Northern Ireland, some of which is cited in Barton and Levstik (2004). The authors make a point of noting that the "progress and freedom" narrative is not relevant to students in Northern Ireland: "in areas of longstanding and seemingly ineradicable conflict, stories of historical progress may have little resonance with the daily experiences of either children or adults" (p. 172). Barton and McCully have also looked at historical thinking and the role of narrative for students in Northern Ireland (2004, 2010). In their 2010 study, they conducted interviews with 253 students in Northern Ireland between the ages of 11 and 14. The interviews began with a photo-sequencing task which led to open-ended

interviews, and were primarily conducted with pairs or small groups of students. The authors found that “students navigated among these multiple sources in a conscious attempt to refine and extend their historical understanding” (p. 156). The sources the authors refer to are “home, school, popular culture, and the community” (p. 156). The findings presented in this article are particularly relevant to the present study, as they indicate that students are adept at filtering information from multiple sources and developing historical narratives which can accommodate multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives.

Peter Seixas has written extensively (1993, 1994, 2004) about students’ historical consciousness, often focusing particularly on Canadian students. Some of his findings (1993) provide further evidence that students’ families have significant influence over their historical understanding. As Seixas deliberately profiled six students in a multicultural setting, he was able to shed light on the ways in which minority students assimilate school and family histories. By interviewing each eleventh grade student twice, as well as observing the students’ social studies classes, Seixas was able to learn more about how students’ conceptualized and understood history. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his findings indicated that the “students’ social studies classes have been apparently unable to integrate the insights from their family experiences into their formal historical study” (p. 321). Seixas goes on to explain the potential impacts of this circumstance:

Whatever history is "official" in such a class is likely to include more material that is insignificant and less material that is significant to these students.

Conversely, the benefits of including family histories are greater, given the variety of historical topics to which a heterogeneous class has been exposed. (p. 321)

Here, Seixas describes the potential benefits of incorporating students' families' stories and experiences into the history classroom for both the students whose families' histories are being discussed and for their classmates. When students' family histories are included within the "official" curriculum of the history classroom, Seixas argues, the students in question are more likely to be engaged in school history and their peers are more likely to gain a broader understanding of history.

**Impact of students' backgrounds on historical understanding.** As students in schools across the United States are becoming increasingly diverse, researchers have also become interested in and attuned to the impact students' ethnic, national, racial, and religious backgrounds have on their historical understanding. Terrie Epstein's (1998, 2000, 2009) seminal work has examined the differences in how African American and European American students use knowledge they have gained from their families and their history classes to interpret U.S. history. She conducted a mixed-methods study of two U.S. history classes (1998), in which 49 of the 59 students enrolled in the classes completed a questionnaire about important events and heroes in US history. In order to gain a better understanding about how the students thought about these events and people, she and a research assistant conducted qualitative interviews with 19 of the students (ten African American and nine European American). Most of the European American students did not see disparities between the histories they learned from their



families and those learned at school, and their narrative frameworks mostly aligned with the ‘progress and freedom’ narrative cited earlier. However, the African American students were less likely to see cohesion between what they had heard from family members and what they heard from their teachers and textbooks. The school history tended to view racism, discrimination, and prejudice as historical artifacts rather than facts of life – which did not resonate with the experiences of the African American students or their families. Therefore, the African American students tended to view school history as “□white people’s history” (p. 419). These findings are telling, in that they reinforce the notion that students’ backgrounds and family experiences can profoundly impact their historical understanding, and that the family histories of minority students may not align with the mainstream narrative as closely as those of their European American counterparts.

Sohyun An (2009) conducted a qualitative study with 42 U.S. Korean high school students that focused on the impact of the students’ migration backgrounds on their historical understanding. The author found that the migration backgrounds of the students heavily influenced their understanding of U.S. history. Within the broader category of “U.S. Korean” students, An was able to identify three sub-groups – second-generation Korean immigrants (“American-Koreans”), transmigrants who had moved to the U.S. for high school after completing primary and middle school in Korea (“Korean-Koreans”), and transmigrants who had moved back and forth between the United States and Korea throughout their schooling (“Bicultural-Koreans”) (p. 769). She found that: “the difference among the identity groups seemed closely, if not exclusively, related to

the different educational experiences of the three groups due to their different migration histories” (p. 770). These differences were related to students’ knowledge of U.S. history and their interest in history in general. However, she also found that school was the primary source of information about U.S. history for all three groups of students. This study is quite informative, as it cautions researchers and teachers from assuming that all co-ethnic students will have similar views of history, as well as demonstrating the powerful role schools play in disseminating national histories to first and second generation immigrant youth.

Carla Peck (2010) conducted a phenomenographic study of twenty-six ethnically diverse twelfth grade students in Canada that examined how the students’ ethnic identities impacted their understanding of Canadian history. Students were asked to discuss how they viewed themselves ethnically, instead of the researcher assigning students labels which may have occluded the complex and dynamic ethnic identities the students had constructed for themselves. Students were then engaged in a photo-elicitation exercise and small group interviews. Peck found that, for all twenty-six participants, the students’ ethnic identities impacted their understanding of Canadian history and also impacted their construction of a Canadian narrative. Peck’s research is important, in that she sought to explicitly uncover how students’ self-described ethnic identities impacted their historical thinking and understanding.

Terzian and Yeager (2007) used a qualitative approach to examine how seventy high achieving Latino (primarily Cuban) eleventh grade students in Advanced Placement U.S. history classes understood events, people, and documents to be historically

significant. Students were asked to complete a written questionnaire and to participate in follow-up focus groups. The students' teacher was also interviewed. Unlike some of the other studies which have specifically examined minority students' historical understanding, Terzian and Yeager found that "the cultural identities of these Latino (and predominantly Cuban) students in many ways complemented and reinforced the official narrative of national uniqueness and progress" (p. 76). The authors discuss several plausible reasons for this finding, noting that the students lived in a community and attended a school in which they are an ethnic majority, and that they belong to an ethnic group (Cuban) that has been racialized as White.

What is striking about these studies of U.S. and Canadian students is that they have focused primarily on U.S. and Canadian history, and the impact the students' backgrounds have had on their understanding of these histories. However, few studies have looked at how U.S. students understand histories with which they have a heritage connection. The present study will continue the line of research into students' historical understanding by investigating how U.S. students construct these narratives. As with previous studies in this vein, this study will take students' racial, ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds into consideration, as these characteristics are often quite influential on students' historical understanding.

## **Design and Methodology: Introduction**

The goal of this study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What narratives do students construct about significant events with which they have a heritage connection?
  - c. What meaning do students attach to events with which they have a heritage connection?
  - d. What reasons do students give for constructing their narratives?
  - e. Who influences students in their narrative constructions?
2. What sources do students trust in the construction of these narratives?
  - f. Why do students trust these sources?
  - g. Do students with different heritage connections trust the same types of sources (e.g., family, school, media, friends)?

This qualitative study used a multiple case studies design to develop an understanding of how students mediate the various stories they hear about the past. This design allowed me to investigate these understandings in depth within and across the focal topics. I focused on students who have heritage connections to the subjects they were studying in school in order to gain insight into the ways in which students interact with and make meaning from the available “stock[s] of stories” (Wertsch, 1998).

Due to the sociocultural influences on this study, it was very important to examine the multiple contexts in which the focal students operate. We know that students are not blank slates, but that instead they come to the classroom with a wealth of experiences and opinions. Therefore, in this study I acknowledged and investigated the importance and

role of the multiple contexts (e.g., school, culture, gender, peer relationships) in and from which students construct historical understanding. A qualitative approach allowed for the use of a variety of research methods, namely interviews, observations, and document analysis, to explore and consider the role of context.

The cases in this study were bounded in two ways. First, the focal topics (the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution, the Holocaust) provided a boundary. This means that the school, students, parents, and teachers related to each focal topic comprised a single case. In this way, there are three cases which make up this study (see Figure 1). Within these three cases, however, each student constituted a case. The student-as-case was bounded by the people (her parent(s) and teacher) and documents (homework, class assignments, other curricular materials) which directly impacted that student's narrative construction. See Figure 2 for an example of the structure of these case boundaries.

Figure 1. Primary Case Boundaries

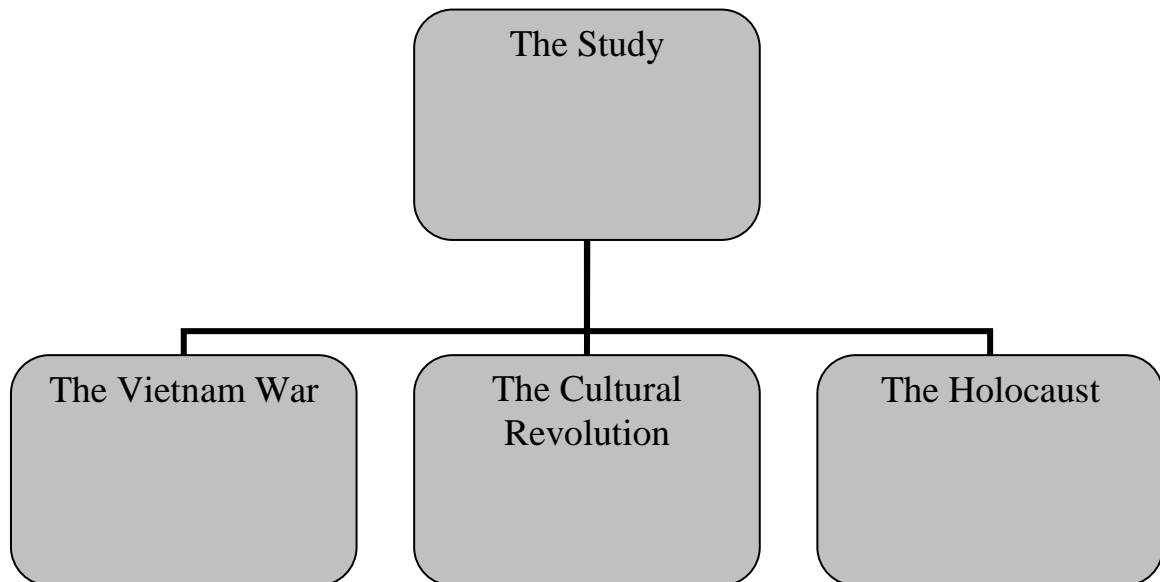
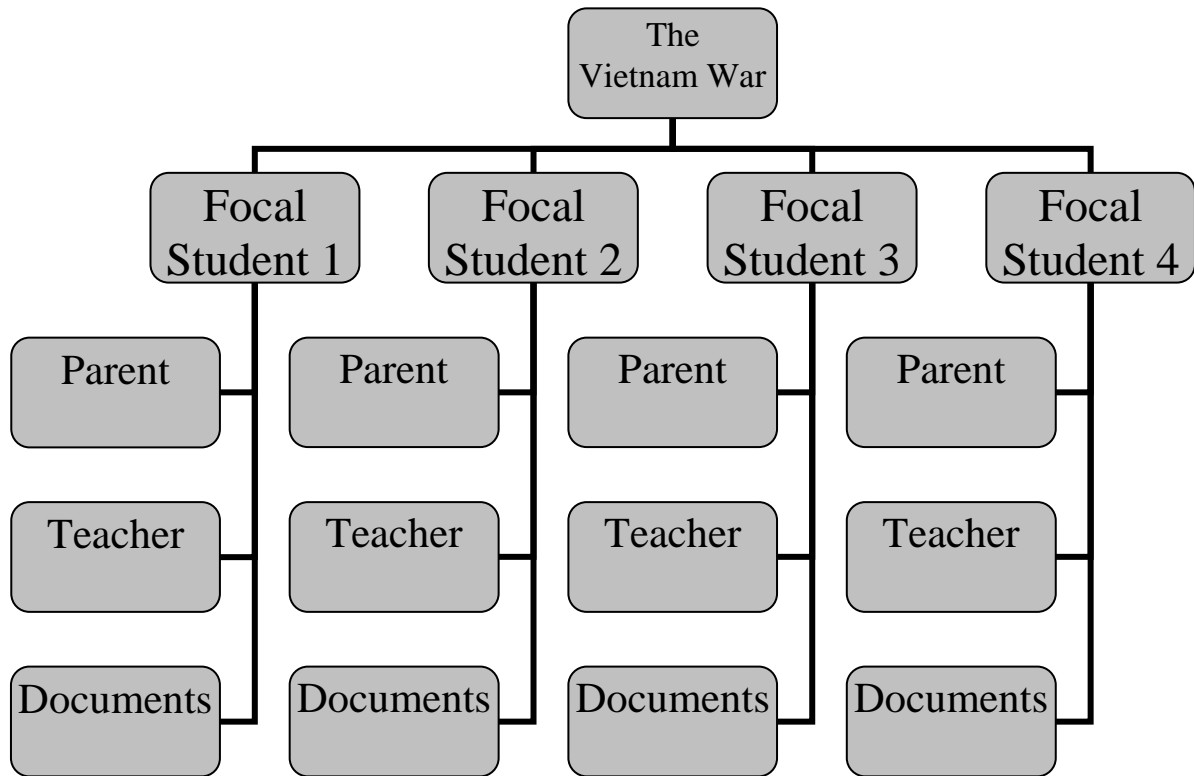


Figure 2. Secondary Case Boundaries – The Vietnam War Case



### Settings

I chose three public high school classrooms in which the focal topics were taught. The focal topics are: the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution, and the Holocaust. I chose these topics for several reasons. First, in order to maintain parity between the topics, I believed that the units would be of similar length, lasting approximately five days. Second, the topics are contained in the national World History standards for grades 7-12<sup>1</sup>, and therefore it was likely these topics would be taught at a variety of public schools during the 2010-2011 school year. Third, these events occurred more than 30 years ago and therefore the students would be at least one generation removed from the

<sup>1</sup> For details, see <http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/world-standards5-12.html>.

events, and the collective memories about the events would have had similar amounts of time to coalesce. Finally, these events can be categorized as “defining moments” in the histories of these communities. No matter what stories the students, parents, teachers, and communities tell about these events, it was unlikely that the study participants would be unaware of their significance to the community.

The criteria for choosing the three classrooms were relatively simple. In order to ensure that I was able to recruit the necessary number of students per focal topic, I focused my study on public schools, and their surrounding communities, which have large populations of people who identify as Hmong (Vietnam War case), Chinese (Cultural Revolution case), or Jewish (Holocaust case). I focused my search on high schools (grades 9-12) with the aim of finding three groups of students of the same grade level, though it was not a requirement. By reaching out through my personal and professional networks, I was able to find three teachers working in schools with significant student populations identified as Hmong, Chinese, and Jewish.

These initial searches for teachers and schools were conducted via emails I sent to friends and colleagues describing my study and asking if anyone knew of a teacher or school that fit my criteria. I received emails back from two colleagues indicating that they knew teachers who may be willing to participate. One teacher was Ms. Adams,<sup>2</sup> in whose classroom I based my study of the Hmong students and the other teacher was Ms. Harris, in whose classroom I based my study of the Jewish students. I received an email from Mr. Larson, who had received my original email from a colleague, indicating his interest in having his classroom serve as the base of my study of the Chinese students.

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<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

Thus, by the end of the Fall 2010 semester, I had identified the three classrooms and had received approval from the three districts, as well as the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board, to conduct my study.

Due to the placement of the units in which the focal topics were taught within the scope and sequence of each school’s curriculum, data collection took place during the Spring 2011 semester. Table 1 identifies the names of the schools, teachers, and courses in which I collected data for each of the three groups, as well as the month in which data collection took place. Each of the three schools, teachers, classrooms, and focal topic units are described in greater detail in Chapters 4-6.

Table 1

*Participating Communities, Schools, Teachers, Courses, and Month*

<b>Focal Group</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Month</b>
Hmong	St. Paul, MN	Garfield High School	Ms. Armstrong	11 <sup>th</sup>	A.P. U.S. History	January
Chinese	Los Angeles, CA	Franklin High School	Mr. Larson	9 <sup>th</sup>	World History	March
Jewish	Chicago, IL	Washington High School	Ms. Harris	9 <sup>th</sup>	Humanities	May

There are several ways in which the makeup of the three focal groups deviated from the original study design. First, I was unable to locate three teachers of the same grade level who were working with the requisite student populations, teaching one of the desired topics, and willing to participate in this study. Therefore, the Hmong students were in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade at the time data collection took place, while the majority of the Chinese students and all of the Jewish students were in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade (one of the Chinese



students was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and was taking the 9<sup>th</sup> grade World History class). Also, the lengths of the three focal units varied more than I had anticipated. The Vietnam War unit consisted of two 90-minute class periods, the Cultural Revolution was taught within a unit on China from 1949-1989 that consisted of five 50-minute class periods, and the Holocaust unit consisted of twelve 42-minute class periods.

Ms. Adams had anticipated that she would spend more than two class periods on the Vietnam War, and in fact I observed her classes the two days prior to the Vietnam War unit based on her initial planning; however, inclement weather and the approaching end of the semester forced her to truncate the longer unit. While the Vietnam War unit was shorter than I had expected, the Holocaust unit was longer than I had expected. This was due primarily to a co-teaching arrangement between Ms. Harris (the history teacher in whose room I conducted observations) and Ms. Marshall (the English teacher with whom she sometimes co-planned and co-taught the Humanities course). Therefore, of the twelve 42-minute class periods, six were spent with the students from 1<sup>st</sup> period (the period in which I observed Ms. Harris' history class) reading Elie Wiesel's *Night* aloud with their peers from Ms. Marshall's 1<sup>st</sup> period English class. Since the students from Ms. Harris' first period history class attended Ms. Marshall's second period English class, and vice versa, Ms. Harris and Ms. Marshall were able to combine their two classes for the first two periods of the day for three days.

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection in this study was interviewing. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the focal students before and after they

learned about the focal topics in school. I intended to conduct all of the first interviews for each group of students prior to the start of their specific focal unit; however, due to some miscommunication and scheduling issues, one student in each group was interviewed after the start of the unit. Each of the students participated in both interviews. I also interviewed each student's parent(s) and teachers once. During interviews with the students and parents, I asked the interviewees to talk about how they understand and interpret the heritage event, where they learned about it, and their feelings about the event. The interviews with the parents also included questions about how and why they pass these stories on to their children, and were intended to provide context and background for the students' interviews. The student interviews included questions about where and from whom they remember learning about the event. I interviewed the teachers about their expectations and goals for teaching these topics; these interview data also provided context for the students' narratives.

I audio recorded and transcribed verbatim<sup>3</sup> all interviews (students, parents, teachers). The students' first interviews each lasted approximately 30 minutes and their second interviews approximately 20 minutes. The parents' interviews each lasted approximately 40 minutes. The teacher interviews each lasted approximately 40 minutes. The students' interviews were conducted at the schools during students' lunch periods or after school, at their homes, or at local coffee shops. The parent interviews were conducted at their homes or at local coffee shops. The teacher interviews were conducted

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<sup>3</sup> While each of the interviews was transcribed verbatim, including pauses, "um," "uh," and "like," the quotations that appear in this manuscript have been denaturalized (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005) and these words have been removed so that the full force of the participants' words is clear to the reader. I did not remove any other words from the transcribed interviews in the writing of this manuscript.

in the teachers' classrooms. The decisions about where and when the interviews took place were made on a case-by-case basis and at the convenience of the interviewees.

### **Student Interviews**

It is important to note that this study follows in the footsteps of several of the projects outlined in the literature review (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Barton & McCully, 2010; Epstein, 1998; Wertsch & O'Connor, 1994; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007). These studies all asked students to tell parts of the stories they understood about their national histories. While the settings and foci of the studies differ, the methods used in the studies are somewhat similar. Several of the studies used a picture-sequencing activity as an interview prompt, while others used a writing activity as the prompt. Importantly, they all sought to understand how students make historical meaning. The interview questions which followed the visual and written prompts then asked students to describe their understandings of history more thoroughly, and to reflect on the sources they trusted in the construction of those historical understandings. These studies yielded rich information about students' historical thinking, and therefore I used similar interview methods with the students in this study.

I provided the students with a written prompt with several questions about the focal topic followed by questions which probed the reasons why students constructed their narratives as they did (see Appendix B). Additionally, I asked where they thought they learned about the focal topic. Because these were semi-structured interviews, the interview questions served as starting points for my conversations with the students. I was then able to probe the students' answers, follow up on their statements, and ask them

to reflect on their ideas. For example, in her first interview, Pa stated that she felt that the Vietnam War was “a genocide.” Intrigued by her answer and uncertain what the word “genocide” meant to her, I asked her to explain in more detail what she meant by her answer.

### **Parent and Teacher Interviews**

Prior research (Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007) has demonstrated that parents and children often have different views of history. Additionally, given the theory driving this study, it seemed critically important to speak with the parents and teachers of the focal students in order to examine more closely the sources students may use and trust in the construction of their heritage history narratives. The parent and teacher interviews did not begin with a writing prompt, but were otherwise quite similar to the student interviews (see Appendix A). The semi-structured interviews began by asking the parents and teachers to narrate the history of the focal event as they know or remember it, and then consisted of follow-up questions which interrogated whether and why they felt these histories should be taught in public school history classrooms, how the parents have discussed these histories with their children in the past, and how the teachers have thought about teaching these histories in light of their heritage student populations. Again, the semi-structured interview format allowed me to ask follow-up questions and probe the interviewees’ answers. For instance, Deborah’s father shared that his work as a professor of literature focuses on the representations of Jews in Renaissance and 17<sup>th</sup> century literature. I was then able to probe the connections he saw

between his work and his identity as a Jew and what, if any, connections he saw between his identity, his work, and the Holocaust.

### **Observations**

I visited the schools to observe all of the class sessions during the focal units. The purpose of the observations was to inform and complement the student interviews. During these observations I took detailed field notes about the events of the classroom for that day. I paid particular attention to the contributions of the focal students to class discussions and documented their body language and general demeanor during class (were they fidgeting or chatting with neighbors, were there moments which seemed to catch their interest, etc). I was able to observe that Calvin, for example, had difficulty sitting still and facing the front of the classroom, as his teacher would have preferred. He was constantly shifting in his seat, laying his head on the desk, and turning around to talk to the girl sitting behind him. I took particular notice of Calvin's behavior on the day Mr. Larson showed the students a documentary about the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989 because he ceased his constant motion and seemed riveted by the images and sounds of the film. We were then able to discuss his reaction to the movie during his second interview. Had I not been in the classroom, I may not have known to ask Calvin about the film. Additionally, being in the classroom during the focal units provided a common point of reference during the students' second interviews and fostered rapport between the students, teacher, and me.

## **Document Collection**

I collected copies of almost all materials (homework assignments, readings, videos, essays, pictures, tests) used or created during the units. These materials served as an important data source with which to triangulate the stories students told in their interviews and to inform the interviews themselves. The materials varied by case, and not all students could locate essays or tests that had been returned by their teachers. A more detailed description of the materials collected for each case can be found in Chapters 4-6.

## **Participants**

### **Students**

My goal was to recruit six participants per group, as I had determined that I would need at least four participating students per group and wanted to allow for attrition. A total of 17 high school students participated in this study – 4 Hmong students, 8 Chinese students, and 5 Jewish students. While all of the students were not in the same grade, the students within each group were all in the same history classes and had the same teacher. All four of the Hmong students were in Ms. Adams' fourth period A.P. U.S. History class, the eight Chinese students were split between Mr. Larson's second and sixth period World History classes, and the five Jewish students were in Ms. Harris' first period Humanities class. See Table 2 for a list of the student participants<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, each student is profiled in much greater detail in Chapters 4-6.

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<sup>4</sup> Given the nature of the study and the importance of the students' heritage, the students' pseudonyms were chosen to reflect their given names. Students with traditional ethnic names were given ethnic pseudonyms and students with Americanized names were given Americanized pseudonyms.

Table 2

*Participating Students and Parents*

<b>Student Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Place of Birth</b>	<b>Parent Name</b>
<i>Hmong Case, Garfield High School, St. Paul, MN. Teacher: Ms. Adams</i>					
Brandon	16	11 <sup>th</sup>	M	U.S.A.	Gary
Isabelle	16	11 <sup>th</sup>	F	U.S.A.	None <sup>1</sup>
Pa	16	11 <sup>th</sup>	F	Thailand (refugee camp)	May <sup>2</sup>
Theresa	16	11 <sup>th</sup>	F	U.S.A.	Valerie <sup>2</sup>
<i>Chinese Case, Franklin High School, Los Angeles, CA. Teacher: Mr. Larson</i>					
Calvin	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	M	U.S.A.	David
Emily	15	10 <sup>th</sup>	F	U.S.A.	Francine <sup>3</sup>
Grace	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	F	China	Harriet
Joseph	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	M	China	Ilene <sup>2</sup>
Lin	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	F	U.S.A.	Martin
Naomi	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	F	China	Julia <sup>2</sup>
Olivia	15	9 <sup>th</sup>	F	China	Pamela
Zachary	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	M	U.S.A.	Rob & Laura
<i>Jewish Case, Washington High School, Chicago, IL. Teacher: Ms. Harris</i>					
Aaron	15	9 <sup>th</sup>	A	U.S.A.	Barbara
Deborah	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	F	U.S.A.	Eli
Michelle	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	F	U.S.A.	Nadine
Ryan	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	M	U.S.A.	Carla <sup>3</sup>
Sophia	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	F	U.S.A.	Wendy

<sup>1</sup>Isabelle's father's ill health ultimately prevented him from participating in the interview process.

<sup>2</sup>These parents were interviewed with the assistance of an interpreter.

<sup>3</sup>Two parents chose to answer the interview questions via email rather than participate in in-person interviews. Both parents cited their busy schedules and many commitments as reasons why they were unable to participate in the full interviews.

**Recruitment.** The recruitment process for each group was slightly different. I will describe the recruitment of one group of students in detail, and then discuss how the recruitment of the other groups deviated from this example. Once I had found the three teachers and received permission from the three school districts to collect data for my study, I began working with the teachers to develop a plan for student recruitment that would cause the least amount of disruption to their classes. In order to introduce the Hmong students to the study and allow them time to talk with their parents about

participating, I first visited Ms. Adams' class on January 10, 2011. She had anticipated beginning her unit on the Vietnam War on January 18, and we agreed that introducing the study one week prior to the start of the unit would allow ample time for students to return the consent forms signed by their parents and to schedule the first interviews for the participating students. I visited Ms. Adams' fourth period A.P. U.S. History class, as she believed there were more Hmong students in her fourth period class than in her other classes. I introduced the purpose of the study and told the students that the only requirements to participate in the study were that the students must identify themselves as Hmong and that a parent or guardian must also agree to be interviewed. I told them that if they wanted to participate, I had a packet containing an assent form for the students to sign and a consent form for parents to sign (see Appendix B). Anticipating that some parents may not have been literate in English, I had had the parental consent form translated into Hmong and had included both the translated and original documents in the packet I gave to students.

Unfortunately, only one of the Hmong students returned the consent form in the first few days after my introduction of the study. I grew concerned about the lack of response and spoke with Ms. Adams about how we could motivate more students to participate. We decided that offering students a small incentive – two \$5 gift cards – might help. I received approval from my advisor and the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board, and the next day Ms. Adams announced in class that all students who completed the first interview would receive a \$5 gift card and, upon completing the second interview, another card. This incentive, combined with some



cajoling on Ms. Adams' part, proved fruitful and three more students volunteered to participate. During this time, I scheduled the first interviews with each of the four students. I was able to interview three of the four before the Vietnam War unit began, though one student's first interview occurred after the first class period of the unit.

Given my experience recruiting the Hmong students to participate in St. Paul, I was wary about my prospects in Los Angeles with the Chinese students. The first change I made was to write a letter of introduction to the parents to accompany the consent forms I would give students to take home to their parents (see Appendix A). As I was asking parents for both their consent to let their children speak with me as well as their own time and knowledge, I thought that perhaps a letter of introduction would aid in recruiting parents. After discussing my recruitment difficulties with Mr. Larson, he elected to offer his students extra credit for participating in my study. For those students who were ineligible or chose not to participate, he offered a comparable extra credit option. As Mr. Larson rarely offered his students extra credit, this proved to be a powerful motivator. Mr. Larson also invited me to speak to all three of his World History classes on the day I introduced the study to the students. For these reasons, eight Chinese students participated in this project; four in the second period class and four in the sixth period class. Therefore, I observed both the second and sixth period classes.

The experience of recruiting Jewish students was slightly different than the other two groups. Ms. Harris knew that several of her Jewish students would be missing school the week before she was planning to start her Holocaust unit as part of their observance of the Passover holiday. Therefore, it was necessary to introduce the study to

the students several weeks prior to the beginning of the Holocaust unit. Ms. Harris and I decided that she would introduce the study and pass out the consent forms, as well as my email address and phone number, and encourage students and their parents to contact me with any questions. I was contacted by two students and one parent via email, all of whom participated in the study. I visited Washington High School during the week prior to the beginning of the Holocaust and met two more students who had volunteered to participate. This brought the total number of Jewish participants to five.

### **Parents and Teachers**

It is important to include the students' parents and teachers among the participants of this study, despite the overall focus on students' narrative construction, because their perspectives have presumably influenced the students' understandings of history. The majority of the parents I interviewed were willing to speak with me either because they wanted to discuss their knowledge and experiences or were simply happy to help their children with a project for school. As the study was situated primarily in the school and my first contact was with the students, the parents were essentially recruited by their children. I was able to conduct face-to-face interviews with one or both parents of fourteen students. Two parents chose to complete the interview questions via email and one parent was unable to complete the interview due to his illness. After speaking with Ms. Adams and Mr. Larson, I was advised that all of the Hmong and Chinese parents were first generation immigrants and I should be prepared to employ the services of interpreters for any parents who felt more comfortable speaking in their native language. Two of the Hmong parents and two of the Chinese parents were interviewed with the

assistance of interpreters, and one of the Chinese parents was interviewed with her daughter present in order to assist with interpretation should the need arise. While the parent interviews do not play a central role in the analysis presented in this dissertation, they were helpful in providing context and background when analyzing data collected directly from the students (interviews, observations, documents).

I interviewed each of the teachers in order to best understand what they wanted their students to learn about the focal topics and how they tailored their planning and teaching of the focal topics knowing that they would be teaching students who had heritage connections to the topic of study. I interviewed each of the three teachers once; Ms. Adams was interviewed at the conclusion of the Vietnam War unit, Mr. Larson was interviewed prior to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution unit, and Ms. Harris was interviewed in the middle of the Holocaust unit. Due to the teachers' busy schedules and to show my appreciation of their willingness to participate in this project, their interviews were conducted at their convenience. I do not believe that the timing of the interviews impacted the teachers' responses to the interview questions.

### **Data Analysis**

I used grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to guide my data analysis. Grounded theory allowed me to generate themes and categories from the various sources of data (interview transcripts, observation field notes, collected materials) that were directly related to my research questions. I began the coding process by reading the interview transcripts and looking for the different ways in which the students talked about the focal event. For example, when reading the Hmong students' transcripts, I looked at

the stories they told about the Vietnam War. I would underline in blue pen any words or phrases which were directly connected to my interview and research questions. For example, one of the interview questions asked students if they felt impacted by the focal event. I then underlined and noted the Hmong students' response to this question, as well as any other instances in which they discussed the lasting effects of the war on Hmong people. Therefore, when I was reading Brandon's transcript and he stated "it changed everything...in Hmong families. It's just not some Hmong families, it changed everybody's family," I underlined his words and wrote "impact" in the margin of the printed transcript.

After completing this initial open coding with all student, parent, and teacher interviews, I engaged in axial coding, where I generated new, broader codes which encompassed the original codes. Throughout this process, I constantly compared (Miles & Huberman, 1994) the initial codes with the new, broader codes to ensure that the participants' words and thoughts were accurately reflected in the codes. For instance, after reviewing Brandon's comments and the comments of his peers, I developed the code "why we're here" which encompassed all of the Hmong students' ideas about one of the impacts of the Vietnam War. During this process, I constantly referred to the students' words in order to make sure that the codes were truly representative of the students' ideas and understandings.

Finally, I engaged in selective coding from the axial codes and again, compared the themes which I identified during this final round of coding with both sets of prior codes to ensure that the themes accurately and honestly represented the ideas of the

participants. As the analysis progressed, I was vigilant in continuing to compare students' words between and among cases as I built themes from the axial and open codes. To aid in this process in the cross-case analysis, I created a table which made it easier to compare the themes across cases (see Table 3 below).

Table 3

*Excerpt of Selective Coding Cross-Case Comparison*

<b>Vietnam War</b>	<b>Cultural Revolution</b>	<b>Holocaust</b>
“Family Comes First”	“Dinner Table Conversation”	“It’s a Horrible Event”
“Everyone Has a Role”	“I’m Not Entirely Sure”	Never Again
Fuzziness	Multiple Perspectives	Multiple Perspectives about the Jewish Experience During the Holocaust
“I Don’t Really, Really Care About it That Much”	“The Beijing Massacre Was So Sad”	
Putting the Puzzle Together		

Light Gray – Importance of family  
 Medium Gray - Uncertainty and confusion  
 Dark Gray – Multiple perspectives/school knowledge

Once I was able to see the themes side-by-side, I color-coded the themes that seemed similar and then returned to the interview transcripts to make sure that the cross-case themes I had developed were representative of the students' words. For example, after looking at the themes across cases, I could see that one theme in each case elucidated the idea that learning about the focal event led to the students developing multiple perspectives about that event. I then reread my within-case analyses of these themes and returned to the students' transcripts and reread my initial coding notes to make sure that this cross-case finding was truly representative of the students' thoughts. This constant comparison throughout the analytic process ensured that the themes are representative of

the thoughts of the participants, and that the themes continue to be directly related to the research questions.

### **Limitations**

#### **Access**

Prior to beginning this study, I anticipated that one significant limitation would be the amount of access I would be able to negotiate with the Hmong and Chinese communities. As a white, U.S. born, Jewish woman, I seemingly had very little in common with these communities. I did not grow up in either St. Paul, Minnesota or Los Angeles and therefore could not even claim a shared childhood experience with the students. As a Jewish woman and former Holocaust educator, I did not anticipate having trouble gaining access to a Jewish community. Therefore, I was very conscious of how I approached the Hmong and Chinese communities, and very much relied on the teachers with whom I worked to guide me in this endeavor.

The community to which I had the most difficulty gaining access was the Hmong community in St. Paul, Minnesota. As I had previously anticipated needing to make relationships with people who were trusted within the Hmong community, and certainly with the community of Hmong students at Garfield High School, I was very fortunate to be working with a teacher who had taught in the district for many years and had excellent relationships with her Hmong students. Therefore, having her as an ally when I introduced the study to the students was an important factor in gaining access to the Hmong community. I was also very fortunate to work with an excellent interpreter, a member of the Hmong community herself who believed in the importance of this work.

She was an invaluable resource, and I am profoundly grateful for her assistance and guidance.

While my outsider status was likely one reason why more Hmong students and parents did not volunteer to participate in this study, I believe that the students and parents with whom I worked were open and honest about their experiences and beliefs about the Vietnam War. Two of the parents were interviewed with the assistance of the interpreter and I believe her presence eased the interview process and allowed the Hmong parents to speak freely about their experiences. I interviewed one Hmong parent in English without the interpreter present. He had previously told his story to several college classes, and was relatively comfortable discussing his experiences with an outsider. Therefore, while there were some boundaries still in place with the Hmong students and their parents, I do not believe that they prevented the participants from being open and honest in their interviews.

I believe that Mr. Larson's close relationships with his students, as well as the students' and their parents' appreciation of the extra credit option, eased access to the Chinese community. Several of the students and their parents double-checked with me during and after the interviews that I would report their participation to Mr. Larson so that the students would receive the available extra credit. Mr. Larson was incredibly supportive of my project, and was very helpful in reminding students that they were to meet me for an interview or opening his room during lunch or after school for me to conduct interviews. I believe that Mr. Larson's enthusiasm for his students and his

subject, as well as his interest in my work, contributed a great deal to my gaining access to the Chinese community in this Los Angeles suburb.

**The researcher.** One of the reasons I did not anticipate having trouble gaining access to the Jewish community in Chicago is that I am a white, Jewish woman who grew up thirty minutes away from Washington High School. Though I have not lived in that community for many years, I remain a member of the community on some level and therefore did not find it too difficult to slip into the community as a researcher. While this closeness with the Jewish participants amplified my perceptions of the differences between myself and the other two groups, I think that it also hindered my ability to conduct an in-depth investigation of the Jewish participants' thoughts. As an outsider with the Hmong and Chinese students, I presented as someone who did not know very much about either the heritage events or how the students, as members of the heritage group, understood and related to those events. The students then had to articulate their thoughts in a way that they may not have felt necessary had I been Hmong or Chinese. As one of the interview questions asked explicitly whether the way students (and parents) discussed the event differently if they were talking to someone of the same heritage group, as opposed to an outsider, the students were able to talk through some of these differences in the course of the interview.

I was conscious during each interview of my status as an outsider or an insider. I endeavored to create connections where none existed with the Hmong and Chinese students in order to let them know that I was someone they could trust. I would greet them when I saw them in the hall, ask how their game or other extra-curricular event had



gone the day before, and generally tried to present myself as an adult who cared about them but was not going to judge them. I was careful during the interviews not to express shock or skepticism and did my best to encourage them to share their thoughts and ideas.

With the Jewish students, I quickly realized that I was going to have to ask students to think of me as someone who was ignorant about the Holocaust and about the ways in which Jews think about and relate to this event. Given my background, this was somewhat difficult but not impossible. I had to push the students to describe what they meant when they shrugged their shoulders or to finish sentences that they left hanging, assuming I could fill in the rest based on our shared heritage. Therefore, while I presume that the Jewish students may have initially trusted me more than the Hmong or Chinese students, this initial trust and assumption of a shared understanding may have made the Jewish students feel as though they did not have to be as explicit in their answers as did the Hmong and Chinese students.

Despite these limitations, I believe that I conducted a thorough, rigorous study and that the participants viewed me as someone they could trust with their stories, ideas, thoughts, and opinions. There were a few aspects of the study design which contributed to the overall success of the project. First, I spent a great deal of time developing and refining the interview protocols. I deliberately aligned the questions asked in the interviews with the research questions driving this study. I consulted my advisors, committee members, and a well-known leader in the field of history education. I then piloted the interview protocols, using the Civil Rights Era as the heritage history when I spoke with two African American university students. I believe this process fostered the

development of interview protocols which asked participants to think deeply, and to speak explicitly, about their knowledge and emotions regarding the heritage events.

Second, I believe my use of personal and professional networks to contact teachers who would be willing to participate in this study fostered a trust between the teachers and myself that would not have existed had we not had mutual acquaintances. I relied heavily on the teachers to vouch for me when recruiting student participants (as I had not met the students prior to asking them to participate in the study), and believe that they were willing to assist me in recruiting students to participate in part because they trusted the person or people who had referred them to me.

## Vietnam War Case: Introduction

Teaching about the Vietnam War era is included in both the Minnesota state social studies standards<sup>5</sup> and the national history standards<sup>6</sup>. At Garfield High School in the Twin Cities metro area, the Vietnam War era is taught in U.S. history classes. The focus of teaching about the Vietnam War era at Garfield and other high schools across the U.S. is on U.S. foreign policy decisions and the schisms those policies caused within U.S. society. For example, teachers and textbooks often focus on the chronology of U.S. military and policy decisions through the administrations of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, the military draft and the experiences of U.S. soldiers during and after their military service, and the ways in which media portrayal of the war impacted public opinion. The war is often presented as the centerpiece of an era of discord and divisiveness in the U.S. While teachers may pick certain events about which to teach – such as the Tet Offensive, Tonkin Gulf Resolution, or the My Lai massacre – they invariably focus on these events from a U.S. perspective. That is to say, the focus is on how these events impacted U.S. policy makers, members of the military, and civilians, and the decisions made and actions taken by those in the U.S. in response to these events. This focus also extends to the sub-stories told by teachers and texts about the social history of the time, including discussions of draft dodgers, the counter-culture, and the anti-war movement, as well as the always-present issues of race and class.

This near-total focus on the U.S. regarding the Vietnam War era is troubling because it eludes serious and sustained curricular attention paid to the experiences,

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<sup>5</sup> <http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/groups/Standards/documents/LawStatute/006219.pdf> The Minnesota state social studies standards were in the process of being reviewed and revised during the 2010-2011 school year. The 2004 standards, cited here, remained in effect during this time.

<sup>6</sup> <http://nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/>

choices, and decisions of people living in Vietnam or the rest of Southeast Asia. Yet, there are important histories within the larger story of the Vietnam War era which may resonate deeply and personally with students in U.S. classrooms. In particular, the story of the Secret War, which expanded U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia from Vietnam into Laos, may reflect the stories and heritage narratives Hmong<sup>7</sup> students have heard from their families. However, this narrative is not currently part of the larger U.S. narrative, and is therefore often overlooked in schools. Consequently, Hmong students rarely see themselves in the formal U.S. curricula about the Vietnam War era.

Until the Pentagon Papers revealed the Secret War to the public, few U.S. residents knew that the CIA had allied with Hmong people to fight the Pathet Lao (Laotian Communists allied with and trained by the Viet Minh and North Vietnam). The Hmong who fought in the Royal Lao Army against the Pathet Lao were represented in the U.S.-Hmong alliance by a smart, charismatic, and tenacious general named Vang Pao. The CIA and General Vang Pao forged an alliance based initially on mutual needs. The U.S. needed forces within Laos who could fight the Pathet Lao, and the Hmong needed the supplies, support, and training that the U.S. was willing to provide (Hillmer, 2010). However, as time went on, the partnership became less and less equal, until the U.S. completely pulled out of the Secret War in 1973, effectively abandoning the Hmong people who had risked their lives and their future in Laos by aligning themselves with the United States. Hmong soldiers continued to fight the Pathet Lao until the cessation of hostilities in Southeast Asia in 1975.

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<sup>7</sup> Hmong people fled persecution in China during the early 1800s, and many sought refuge in the highland mountainous areas of Laos, becoming one of several ethnic minority groups to call this area home.

Once the war was over, the Pathet Lao retained control of the country and announced their plans to persecute the Hmong who had fought with the U.S. during the war. While some Hmong fled Laos during the war, the post-war persecution by the Pathet Lao spurred many more Hmong people to flee to neighboring Thailand, where they lived in overcrowded refugee camps. Hmong leaders – primarily General Vang Pao – negotiated with the U.S. to take in Hmong refugees, arguing that the U.S. bore some responsibility because the Hmong were being persecuted due to their alliance with the U.S. This led to several waves of Hmong immigration to the U.S. A few communities took the majority of the refugees (including Fresno, California, St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, and parts of Wisconsin), and Hmong people who did not initially move to these enclaves soon moved closer to family members. The Hmong population is now concentrated in several areas around the U.S.; primarily in California and the Midwest.

This chapter investigates how the children of Hmong refugees understand the Vietnam War. Four Hmong students at Garfield High School chose to participate in this study, and their thoughts are represented here. First, I review the existing literature about both Hmong students' experiences in schools and the teaching and learning of the Vietnam War era. I then give a brief background about the setting of this study, Garfield High School, and Ms. Adams' two-day Vietnam War era lesson. I then introduce the four focal students, followed by the construction and analysis of the students' narratives about the Vietnam War. Finally, I provide a broader look at the meanings the students ascribe to the Vietnam War.

### **Review of Literature: Vietnam War Era Curricula**

In this section, I focus on the literature which addresses the Vietnam War era as a curricular topic. A cursory examination reveals that there is a need for further study of how all students understand and think about the Vietnam War era, in particular those students – like the Hmong – who have a heritage connection to this event. The Vietnam War era is often taught in U.S. History classes and the focus is on the experiences, decisions, and impact of the war on U.S. government officials, members of the military, and civilians. The existing body of research reflects this focus.

The most relevant study is the previously cited work of Wineburg and colleagues (2007). Fifteen focal students and their parents were asked to analyze a series of photos from the Vietnam War era; the researchers analyzed the participants' responses to the three photos which prompted the most discussion from the participants. All three photos represented events which took place on U.S. soil – a veteran visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a protestor putting a flower in the barrel of a soldier's gun, and a pro-war hard hat rally. The students often cited popular movies, in particular *Forrest Gump* (1994), as they discussed what they knew and thought about the Vietnam War. The authors conclude that the students developed an understanding of the Vietnam War in which U.S. civilians were not supportive of the war effort, and the soldiers were unfairly blamed for carrying out unpopular orders. Wineburg et al. demonstrate that while the Vietnam War era narratives constructed by the students may not always be historically accurate, they do tend to be focused on the U.S. experience.

Berman (1988) examined the relationship between the portrayal of the Vietnam War in U.S. history courses and the U.S. educational system as a whole. While Berman rightly notes that many U.S history textbooks do not mention the number of non-American casualties or “attempt to understand American involvement in Vietnam from the Vietnamese frame of reference” (p. 149), his primary focuses on the relationship between the attitudes that allowed atrocities such as the My Lai massacre to take place and the lack of work in schools to change those attitudes. Berman’s sharp critique of the “sterility of curriculum and textbooks which gloss over the human reality of Vietnam in the interests of the institutional structure” (p. 155) pushes the field to think about what story the official curriculum is telling, and to interrogate how students receive, understand, and make sense of this story.

McMurray (2007) provides a brief history of the teaching of the Vietnam War era in U.S. schools, ostensibly as a guide for teachers grappling with how to teach the Iraq War of the 2000s. He first gives a quick overview of the evolution of U.S. history textbooks during the 1980s and 1990s, during which time the Vietnam War gained a place in standard textbooks (though not without the problems of many history texts, including a lack of contextualization or examination of historical actors other than official officeholders), and also mentions the special edition of *Social Education* in 1988 devoted to the teaching of the Vietnam War. He then highlights the ways in which several teachers documented their own teaching of the war, and leaves current teachers with advice that would probably serve them well in all areas of their pedagogy. These guidelines included going beyond the textbook to examine the history and culture of

Vietnam, and using oral histories, guest speakers, and student interviews to help students make more personal connections to the war.

Several articles written by teachers and former teachers highlight strategies similar to those recommended by McMurray. DeRose (2007) guided his students through a textbook analysis which compared the portrayal of the Vietnam War in both U.S. and Vietnamese textbooks. Murray (2004) used a variety of oral histories (email and in-person interviews, guest speakers) as the basis for his Vietnam War era unit. He endeavored to include multiple perspectives by having students correspond with U.S. military veterans, Vietnamese civilians, former anti-war protestors, female Red Cross volunteers, and Montagnards from Vietnam who fought with the U.S. during the war. Howlett (2004) engaged his high school and local college students in a study of the Vietnam War era rooted in national, local, and school newspaper archives. He asked his students to investigate how the teenagers and young adults who grew up during the time of the Vietnam War on Long Island – where the students themselves also live – responded to the war. Johannessen (2003) discusses his use of non-fiction literature in his English classes to both help his students discuss the universal themes naturally brought up by a study of war, and to help the students better relate to their parents and grandparents, who had lived through the Vietnam War era. All of these articles indicate that students are being engaged in critical thinking through project-based learning. Because they are not empirical studies, the authors leave many questions about methodology, student demographics, and implications for the teaching and learning of the Vietnam War era unanswered.



## **Setting, Curriculum, and Participants**

### **Garfield High School and Ms. Adams**

Garfield High School, located in the Twin Cities metro area, is set on a busy commercial street not far from an interstate highway. The streets to the sides and back of the school are lined with single-family homes. I spent time at Garfield in January and February of 2011, when the winter sun brightly lit the massive piles of snow on each lawn, curb, and street corner. Garfield is one of 13 high schools in a large, urban district. During the 2010-2011 school year, 46% of Garfield students identified as Asian, the largest population in the school (29% identified as Black, 14% as White, 10% as Hispanic, and 2% as American Indian). As the Twin Cities have one of the largest Hmong populations in the U.S. (Ngo, 2006), it is likely that a significant number of the Asian students at Garfield identify as Hmong.

Ms. Adams has been teaching high school history for over 20 years. She is a dynamic, thoughtful, opinionated teacher who is passionately and sincerely interested in developing strong critical thinking skills in her students. Ms. Adams, who remembers participating in an anti-war march with her parents when she was nine years old, calls the Vietnam War a “confusing time.” She used these words in both her interview and when she introduced the war to her students.

The four focal students were in Ms. Adams’ fourth period 11<sup>th</sup> grade Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History class. Garfield runs on the quarter system in a block schedule, with students taking four classes per quarter which they attend for 90 minutes each day. The Vietnam War lesson was taught over two days towards the end of the

second quarter and took approximately three hours of instructional time. Ms. Adams had hoped to spend two more class periods on the topic, but several snow days earlier in the quarter forced her to amend her plans. Normally she would have had students evaluate each others' oral interview essays (described below) during class time. Due to time constraints, however, she turned this activity into a homework assignment. She also curtailed time available for student questions as a means of shortening the unit.

### **Vietnam War Curriculum.**

During the two-day lesson, Ms. Adams gave a PowerPoint lecture on the Vietnam War and showed one documentary film. The first 90 minute lesson was focused on the war itself, and was structured around a PowerPoint<sup>8</sup> which focused on the factors that led the U.S. to enter the war, major events of the war, (e.g., Tet Offensive, My Lai massacre, etc.), the use of chemical warfare, and the impact of the war on the U.S. The second 90 minute lesson was focused on the social history of the era, and was structured around a video titled *Making Sense of the Sixties*,<sup>9</sup> which profiled anti-war protestors as well as the Civil Rights Movement. Students were also assigned two chapters from their textbook<sup>10</sup>, titled "The Stormy Sixties: 1960-1968" and "The Stalemated Seventies: 1968-1980," both of which included information about the Vietnam War. The Secret War was not mentioned in either chapter. The students were assigned an oral interview which asked them to interview someone who had lived through "one of the stories we've learned this quarter," which covered the period 1930-1990, and then write about that person in a 250-

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<sup>8</sup> The presentation Ms. Adams used can be found here: <http://www.pptpalooza.net/PPTs/AHAP/TheVietnamWar.PPT>

<sup>9</sup> A six-hour documentary from PBS, Ms. Adams showed a one-hour segment titled "In a Dark Time," a further description of which can be found at <http://www.sirenvisual.com.au/Product/83.php>

<sup>10</sup> Bailey, T.A., Kennedy, D.M. & Cohen, L. (1998). *The American pageant: A history of the republic*, 11<sup>th</sup> edition. Houghton Mifflin. For more information, see here: [http://college.cengage.com/history/us/bailey/american\\_pageant/11e/students/ace/](http://college.cengage.com/history/us/bailey/american_pageant/11e/students/ace/)

500 word essay. Finally, there was one multiple choice question on the final exam which dealt with the Vietnam War era and a document based question (DBQ) that focused on the different attitudes present in the U.S. about the Vietnam War.

Ms. Adams directly addressed the Secret War at two points during her lecture on the Vietnam War. The first mention occurred when Ms. Adams reached the thirteenth slide in the PowerPoint, which displayed a map of Southeast Asia highlighting the Ho Chi Minh Trail. While showing this slide, she talked about how the North Vietnamese used the trail to route soldiers and supplies to South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia, and noted that the process “as you know, pulls Laos into the war.” This was her first mention of Laos, and indicates that she expected her students to have some prior knowledge of the Secret War. The second mention came later in the lecture when Ms. Adams discussed Nixon’s decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Southeast Asia, leaving the ground war to the South Vietnamese in Vietnam and the Hmong in Laos. She prompted Hmong students to contribute to this conversation by saying that Nixon employed “as you know, the Hmong under the direction of…” at which point she waited for a student to say “General Vang Pao.” Brandon, one of the four focal students, was the first student to speak and correctly identified the Hmong leader. Ms. Adams quickly went on to explain that the CIA hired Hmong soldiers and that most people in the U.S. knew nothing about the Secret War until Hmong refugees started arriving in the U.S. in the 1980s, and that some people still know nothing about this event. This second mention of the Secret War, which occurred within the last ten minutes of the first 90-minute class period, was the first and only time Ms. Adams used the term “Secret War”

in class. Neither of these brief mentions of the Hmong experience received further attention in the classroom, yet they did appear in the students' narratives.

### **Student Profiles**

**Theresa.** Theresa was the first Hmong student to volunteer to participate in this study. She is a quiet, serious, thoughtful young woman with a deep devotion to her education and a desire to learn as much as possible about the world around her. Born in California, Theresa moved with her parents to the Twin Cities when she was a few months old and is the oldest of six children. Theresa sat in the large group of desks in the middle of Ms. Adams' classroom, in an aisle seat close to the front of the classroom. I sat several seats behind Theresa during my observations, and noticed that her posture during class rarely wavered. She sat up straight, with her legs wrapped around the legs of her chair and her feet tucked into the wire rack under her seat. During her interviews, she would carefully choose her words as she pushed her glasses up on her nose.

**Pa.** During the week I spent in Ms. Adams' class, I was constantly struck by how Pa sat in her desk. Pa would turn her body sideways in her desk so that her back was against the far wall and she could tuck her knees under her chin and rest her feet on the edge of her chair, with her notebook balanced on her knees and her long hair hanging like a curtain between her and the rest of the class. At first glance a quiet and reserved young woman, Pa's bubbly personality shone through in her quick, easy, and infectious laughter. It was clear from the first moments of our initial interview that the Vietnam War is something which holds great and troubling meaning for her. Pa was the only one of the four Hmong students to have been born in a refugee camp in Thailand, and moved

to the U.S. with her family when she was three months old and they soon settled in the Twin Cities.

**Brandon.** Brandon was the only male Hmong student to participate in this study. A middle child in his family, he is a reserved, soft-spoken young man. Brandon sat on the opposite side of the room from the girls, near several of his male friends with whom he would joke and laugh before and after class. He seemed to sit forward and pay attention quite closely during certain parts of class, and sat back in his chair at other moments. He took few notes, yet seemed to be actively engaged as he listened to the lectures, conversations, and films that comprised the curriculum. During interviews, Brandon's dispassionate demeanor disappeared as he talked animatedly about his family and their experiences.

**Isabelle.** Isabelle was the last student to volunteer to participate in this study, and did so when she saw that her classmates were hesitant to sign up. An outgoing, poised, driven young woman, she was so busy with her various academic and extra-curricular activities that it was very difficult for us to find a time to schedule her second interview. The oldest child in her family, Isabelle was well-versed in the language of opportunity, repeatedly stressing the responsibility she felt to take advantage of the educational opportunities afforded to her as a U.S. citizen. Isabelle's parents were born in refugee camps, unlike the older parents of her peers who were born in Laos and fled to refugee camps during and after the Secret War. In class, Isabelle often sat perched forward in her chair, with one leg tucked under, pen poised and ready to take notes. Due to her father's

extended illness, Isabelle was the only Hmong student whose parent I was unable to interview.

### **Student Narratives**

The students' narratives followed two general arcs. Three of the students' narratives began with what they had learned from their parents. They focused on the Secret War and discussed the hardships their parents and other family members experienced while fleeing the Pathet Lao, and named General Vang Pao as one of the most important people involved in the war. The fourth student, however, developed a narrative which flowed in the opposite direction. Instead of discussing family stories and experiences during the Secret War, Isabelle recited facts and figures about the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War during her first interview. She only discussed her family's stories when prompted by the interview questions, and did not seem to share the same connection to these stories as her classmates did to their parents' stories. It was only during her second interview that Isabelle considered stories and ideas she had heard from family members and what meaning they might hold for her.

One interesting facet of the narratives constructed by the Hmong students is that they are incomplete, fragmented, and spotty. Before they learned about the Vietnam War in Ms. Adams' class, they stated that they had primarily learned about the conflicts in Southeast Asia from their parents. Although the students' parents told very personal stories about their own experiences, they rarely went into detail about the outside forces which led to being forced from their homes and undertaking a perilous journey across the Mekong River to safety. Some of the students had previously studied the Vietnam War

in school, but these stories did not seem to greatly influence the names, dates, and events they referenced during their first interviews. Although the Secret War is a story well-known to members of the Hmong community (including the students in this study), it is not necessarily known by other U.S. residents. Possibly due to the absence of the Secret War in popular or mainstream narratives of the Vietnam War, the students sometimes had difficulty piecing together a cohesive narrative solely from their parents' stories.

Ultimately, it seems as though these students were struggling to fit together two separate stories – the personal stories they heard from their parents about the Secret War and the official story of the Vietnam War they learned in school. While they all knew of, and greatly respected, the recently-deceased General Vang Pao, and talked about the role he played in leading Hmong people during and after the war, they rarely connected other pieces of these disparate stories.

In this section, I construct the students' narratives of the Vietnam War, based on their responses to interview questions. I also note where specific parts of the narratives seem to be derived from either stories the students had heard from parents or other family members, information students learned from school (including Ms. Adams' lectures, videos shown in class, the course textbook, etc.), or other sources (such as films, books, friends).

### **“Family Comes First”**

In all student interviews, I began by asking each student to think of important people and events involved in the Vietnam War. This exercise was meant to jog the students' memories and to help them begin to construct narratives about the war. Due to

time constraints, Brandon's first interview took place directly after the PowerPoint lecture Ms. Adams gave on the Vietnam War. However, his initial thoughts on the Vietnam War were related to the Hmong refugee experience and stories he had heard from his father and grandfather, and emphasized that the Vietnam War "changed everything" for Hmong people. He mentioned General Vang Pao as being an important person, and that the leader's then-recent death was also an important event in the Hmong community. When asked about what had just been discussed in his U.S. History class, Brandon began to fuse together stories he'd learned from his family with what he had just heard in class:

I mean of course, family comes first, and you know – I don't know, it's just – it made – it changed everything – it changed, mostly, everything in Hmong families. It's just not some Hmong families, it changed everybody's family. And the presidents, I think they was – it woulda been a better choice if something else woulda happened instead of, just withdrawing – we were taught that Nixon, President Nixon just, you know, as he got elected, he just stepped out of Vietnam or something like that, and I think he shoulda just continued it or something, to finish it, instead of just making [the Hmong] do it themselves, 'cause, they got involved in the war already, so they might as well finish it, instead of just backing down and leaving everything.

Here, Brandon makes his family's stories about Hmong emigration to the U.S. the center of his narrative. He then tied the decision making of U.S. presidents, in particular President Nixon, to the impact it had on his family and all Hmong families.



Theresa and Pa also rooted their narratives in their families' stories, particularly in the conflicts that had occurred involving Hmong people in Laos before and during the Vietnam War. When Theresa was asked which events were important to the Vietnam War, she mentioned the Laotian Civil War: "Because, I think it would have led to why the Hmong people were kinda kicked out of Laos, and they had to go – and they also led to the refugee camps." Pa approached this history slightly differently, by mentioning that "Hmong people hav[e] no land," and that she felt the Vietnam War was "a genocide." Pa offered this explanation of the genocide:

Mmm...I think...I don't know, I think it was just a battle between the Hmong people and the Laos, trying to get...the Hmong people to become...to live in Laos and stay there. Um, I think it's just...the Laos people, I guess (giggle). I would have to go with that... I feel like they just...killed each other, and they were just going up against each other.

Here, Pa gives her impression of the struggle between the Laotians and the Hmong. Even before they learned about the Vietnam War in Ms. Adams' class, both Theresa and Pa had some understanding of the interconnectedness of the Laotian Civil War and the Vietnam War, and past conflicts between Hmong people and the regimes under which they were living in Laos.

Like Brandon, both students mentioned the changes in the Hmong community as a result of the Vietnam War. Pa discussed how "hard" it had been for her mother to leave family members in Laos and to come to the U.S., and how she herself felt disconnected from her culture. Towards the end of her first interview, Theresa said that the most

important thing to remember about the Hmong experience during the Vietnam War is to “remember that it took a lot of effort for this, and that we lost a lot of lives in this.” It was clear from the first moments of their interviews that these students saw the Vietnam War as a defining and sad moment, not only in Hmong history, but also in their parents’ and to some extent their own lives.

### **“Everyone Has a Role”**

When Theresa was asked to name people who were important during the Vietnam War in her first interview, she said “everyone has a role” and proceeded to mention Ho Chi Minh as the leader of the Communist party in North Vietnam, the CIA as recruiters of the Hmong, and General Vang Pao as the leader of the Hmong people. During her second interview, Theresa focused more on the U.S. Theresa was the only one of the four focal students to discuss the U.S. homefront during her interviews, when she named important events: “the counter-culture, so the hippies, and I’m not sure if I’m mixing them up, but I’m – I think, was it the hippies that protested also against the war?” and added to her list of important people: “the American soldiers and the people protesting, so the counter-culture.” Theresa was very affected by the portrayal of U.S. soldiers in the media, which was included in the video Ms. Adams showed during the Vietnam War lesson. In particular, Theresa mentioned that the soldiers were involved in war crimes such as the My Lai massacre, and that they were subsequently called “baby killers” upon their return from the war. Several times during the interview, she expressed interest in learning more about U.S. soldiers’ experiences and wished she had heard more of their personal stories.

Like Theresa, during her second interview Pa added “the U.S., the Viet Cong, the Laos, and the Hmong” to her list of important people in the Vietnam War. When she was asked to explain these choices, she linked them all together:

I put down the U.S. because of their involvement, and then the Viet Cong because...they're like the...the bad people, you could say. And then I put down Laos because they used Laos as – the Hmong, they used it as a place to run to. And then, the Hmong were kinda like the victims, you could say.

While Pa and Theresa incorporated different parts of what they learned at school into their narratives, they both broadened their narratives beyond family stories to include new information. In Pa's case, the addition of the U.S. and the Viet Cong reflect the information Ms. Adams presented at school; Pa was able to find a place for them in her existing narrative, in which the Hmong were victims running from the “bad people.” During her first interview, she named Laotians as the “bad people” who victimized the Hmong. This is echoed in the essay Pa wrote after interviewing her mother about her mother's experience during the war. In the essay, her mother discusses running from the Vietnamese. Looking at the comments Pa made about genocide during her first interview, and the way she described the conflict during her second interview, it seems that Pa is somewhat uncertain about who is attacking or victimizing the Hmong. She clarified her statements a few moments later:

I picked [these things to add to my list] because they play a major role in the Vietnam War because the U.S. was helping fight off the Viet Cong, and then the Hmong were the victims, so they're just running away. They were innocent, but

then they were drawn into the problem along with them...I kinda have to say the Vietnamese [drew the Hmong into the war], because they were kinda victimizing the Hmong, and then, the U.S. was asking them to help fight off the Vietnamese so that they could take out the American soldiers.

Here, Pa has changed her opinion about who the Hmong were fighting. In her first interview, she said it was the “[Laotians] and the Hmong” who were fighting while the Viet Cong were the aggressors in her second interview. Perhaps more interesting is the way she discussed the Hmong during this interview. During her second interview, Pa characterized the Hmong as “victims,” a word she did not use during her first interview. As this is not a word Ms. Adams used during class, it is possible that Pa came to see the Hmong as victims after interviewing her mother for a school project. In the essay, Pa writes in her mother’s voice about “trying to avoid being caught by Vietnamese soldiers.” Similar to Brandon, Pa’s narrative changed over the course of her two interviews, but she continued to focus on the Hmong experience in the Vietnam War throughout. All three students – Pa, Theresa, and Brandon – brought information they learned in school together with the stories they had learned from their parents to create broader narratives.

### **Fuzziness**

Despite these broader narrative constructions, two of the students remained confused about the history. During both interviews, Theresa was unsure about how the events and people she mentioned fit together chronologically; she referred to the parts of the history about which she was not sure as being “fuzzy.” During her second interview, she talked about these “fuzzy” parts:

I'm still kinda fuzzy on when the war started, but probably just putting together where the soldiers come in and when the Hmong people come in, and then, 'cause I didn't really know much, I think we could have talked a little bit more about the Laotian War, 'cause I didn't really get that.

Later in her second interview, Theresa added:

'Cause I know the CIA recruited General Vang Pao to recruit people to help in the Vietnam War, and so, it's kind of like, we're having our own, and then I know a lot of Communists tried recruiting Hmong people too, so, I'm not sure exactly what the Secret War's about, but I know it pertains to Hmong people.

A few minutes later, she stated: "sometimes I mix up the Vietnam War and the Secret War." In these three comments, Theresa talks about how learning about the Vietnam War in school has helped connect some of the pieces, but there are still some parts that are "fuzzy." Importantly, one of these "fuzzy" parts is the connection between the Laotian Civil War and the Vietnam War, and then between the Vietnam War and the Secret War – important links for a Hmong girl who is trying to figure out exactly how this history relates to her.

As Theresa herself noted, she seems to weave together the stories she's heard from her parents and the information she's gleaned from school as she tries to make sense of the Vietnam War. She discussed people and events relevant to her family – namely General Vang Pao and the Laotian Civil War – and those which are more relevant to their adopted country – namely the counter-culture related to the anti-war movement and the American soldiers. However, when asked to give a more concise narrative – to tell a

cohesive story – she does not have enough pieces of the puzzle to detail how all of these events and people fit together. Theresa was able to make some connections between her family’s stories and what she learned in school in that she saw the Secret War as being somewhat parallel to the Vietnam War, yet the borders between the two were still “fuzzy” after studying the Vietnam War in school.

Pa also discussed her frustrations with her lack of knowledge about the Vietnam War. She began to cry at the beginning of her first interview, and while I dug around in my bag for emergency tissues, she offered this unsolicited explanation for her tears, “‘cause I was born there, and then...having to come from Thailand and not being able to really know much about it, it’s really hard.” Though she left Thailand when she was three months old and was living in the Twin Cities a few months after that, this tie to her birthplace – without an understanding of what happened there – is something that clearly upsets Pa. Pa tied her ignorance about the Vietnam War to feeling disconnected to Hmong culture. Like some of her peers, Pa compared herself to her more-recently arrived cousins:

Comparing us Hmong people to my cousins that just came from Thailand and stuff, yeah it seems like they have more culture, while us Hmongs here that have lived in America for a long time now, we are – we’re more Americanized, compared to them. They – they’re more culturized than us. They know more stuff about our culture than we do.

Still, Pa felt a very strong connection between knowledge and interest in the Vietnam War, and what it means to be Hmong. During her first interview, when asked what she

would say to a classmate who didn't care about the Vietnam War, she responded "Well, if someone...said that to me, and I was there, I probably'd be like 'well then you're not Hmong!'" Despite this connection, she did not feel as though she truly understood what had happened during the war, "...even though I have a strong connection with it, I don't know where to start, or...how to end it...it would be a complicated story."

Theresa and Pa felt that it would be important for people both inside and outside the Hmong community to know the story of the Vietnam War, and to know the role the Hmong people played in the Secret War; neither, however, felt at the outset that they had enough information to accurately inform others. While both students felt they gained knowledge from Ms. Adams' lectures and the videos, they were both still left with questions at the conclusion of the lesson.

### **"I Don't Really, Really Care About it That Much"**

Unlike her peers, Isabelle did not immediately mention stories, facts, or attitudes she had heard from her family, and did not discuss her family or Hmong history until she was asked if she felt a connection to the Vietnam War. Even then, her response was somewhat less personal than the responses of her peers:

There was something about mentioning Indochina, and that was kinda like what the Laos Cambodia Vietnam, and that was where the Hmong people sort of came into play, because they were from Laos, and so I just thought ok, that kinda related to me because that was where my roots was at, and...that's about it. Like, that's how – that's what it means to me.

With this response, Isabelle doesn't reference her parents' journeys from Laos to the U.S., as her peers often did. She does refer to her "roots," which clearly indicates a connection to the history through her Hmong identity, but "roots" is a term that could be used by a person several generations removed from an event. By choosing this word, instead of "parents" or "grandparents," she seems to indicate a larger distance between herself and the history than her peers. She was also the only Hmong student who said that she "[didn't] really, really care about [the Vietnam War] that much." During her first interview, she listed the number of casualties "about 500,000 [U.S. soldiers' lives] total (sic)...and that about 350,000 [civilians] were also killed during the war," and summed up the war by saying "a lot of lives were lost, and it was one of the longest war, that America had fought in, but...never won.." Here, she makes no mention of General Vang Pao, the Laotian Civil War, the Secret War, or family members fleeing Laos.

Also during her first interview, Isabelle briefly discussed U.S. anti-war protestors, as she had interviewed a woman involved in the anti-war movement for her essay. She said that though her family sometimes discussed their experiences during the war, she would be more likely to find information about the war by "going through the textbooks or the website facts that I find." Throughout her first interview, Isabelle seemed somewhat disinterested in the war, and I was intrigued by the difference in her attitude compared to her peers. It is possible that, unlike her peers, she felt that she did know the history, and that she had grown tired of the same stories:

Indochina I learned way back in sixth grade, however, the memory, it's still blurry so I can't really remember about that part. But then...projects that I did, it's been



over-repeated about the Hmong history...you always get the same story, over and over again, you kind of just blur it out. And you don't really remember because there's just so much that you can't really grasp the true meaning of it.

However, as the interview progressed, Isabelle introduced a new idea – that how she felt about the war reflected her parents' views about the war. Unfortunately, Isabelle's father was ill during the time I was interviewing the Hmong students and their parents, and I was never able to interview him. Therefore, unlike the other students, I cannot compare Isabelle's words with her father. She provided an interesting insight, though, which may lead to a deeper understanding of why Isabelle felt somewhat distanced and dispassionate from the Vietnam War. After making the statement about not really caring about the history, I asked her what she thought would make someone care about it. She answered:

I think it's probably through family, because, if your family really, really truly cares about it, then you would, too. And if they don't, then you don't. And so it just depends on who you, you know, are with.

Here, Isabelle seems to be saying that she doesn't care because she doesn't sense that her family cares. In a way, she seems a bit wistful, almost like she would want her family to care more than they do. This wistfulness is echoed in the comments she made toward the end of her first interview, while discussing the death of General Vang Pao:

I was really shocked by it, even though I don't really know him personally, but just hearing the news that he died... somebody just came up, like "wow, he died." It was devastating... even though it didn't really like – even though I've never met him, and I just hear about him.

A few minutes later, I asked her if her family had discussed the general's death. She was thoughtful and somewhat sad in her response:

Yeah they did, but like I said, they didn't really care about it, so that's probably why I don't really care about it, too. But then his death kinda like made me in a weird mood, however, they didn't really care about it – they're like, somebody else will take his place. But I'm like, I don't really think so since he was dated back in the day.

In these two comments, the words Isabelle uses to discuss her feelings about the death of this powerful and well-known man, “shocked” and “devastated,” indicate that she was deeply affected by his death. She also explicitly links her parents' lack of care with her own, and one wonders if her “weird mood” stems from a desire on her part to develop a stronger emotional connection to a history in which her family does not appear to be invested.

Like her peers, Isabelle's narrative was broader during her second interview, as she focused on the Secret War from the first moments of her second interview and maintained this focus throughout. Instead of mentioning the numbers of people who died during the Vietnam War, she immediately mentioned General Vang Pao and how her grandfather had fought in the Secret War. When asked what she remembered as being new or interesting in her history class, Isabelle responded, and she and I had the following brief conversation (her understanding of the chronology is correct, though she has confused President Kennedy with President Nixon):

*Isabelle:* I guess I didn't know about that one law, that – I forgot what that

president was called at that time, he had – Kennedy, was it?

*SL:* Kennedy started it, and then Johnson –

*Isabelle:* Yeah, he did that one thing where all the American soldiers could go back to the United States and so that – that’s how the secret war kind of formed?

Yeah, ‘cause I knew there was a Secret War, but I didn’t know how it was formed, and who kind of made it. I learned about that.

*SL:* So...it helped kind of clarify in your mind the connection between the Vietnam War and the Secret War?

*Isabelle:* Yeah.

Here, Isabelle recalls a moment from Ms. Adams’ lecture when she briefly discussed Nixon’s decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Southeast Asia, leaving the Hmong soldiers to fight the Pathet Lao under the direction of General Vang Pao. This moment, one of two times Ms. Adams specifically mentioned the Hmong in her lecture, occurred during the last ten minutes of a 90-minute class period and the Hmong were not discussed in any other curricular materials (i.e., the video and textbook). Still this was the moment that stuck with Isabelle, perhaps because this one moment clarified some of the history she already knew, and made a concrete connection between what she had heard about the Secret War from her family, and what she was learning in school about U.S. history.

Unlike her peers, Isabelle did not seem to have many questions about what had happened in the past. Yet, Isabelle did experience moments of uncertainty during her second interview. Throughout both interviews, Isabelle was very concerned with “facts” and discerning the truth from “exaggeration.” A good student who took great pride in

her academic work, Isabelle used similar wording when discussing how she would weave together what she learned at school with what she had learned from home. During her second interview, Isabelle used the metaphor of constructing an academic argument to describe this process:

I learned the facts through school, and I learned the stories from families....there's always a statement, and you always need evidence to back it up, so the books are the evidence, and the statements are kind of like the experiences from the family..

Here, it seems that Isabelle sees a connection between her family's stories about the Secret War and what she learned in school about the Vietnam War and the Secret War. By discussing how her family's stories support the evidence from school-related books, she makes that connection and obliquely discusses how she would construct a narrative about the Vietnam War. However, when asked to describe the connection between the two wars, Isabelle described them as being "really separate." More interestingly, she appeared to see the Secret War as existing outside official history. As time began to run short toward the end of her second interview, Isabelle shared a bit more about the difference between the Vietnam War and the Secret War, and we had the following exchange:

*Isabelle:* Hmm...well, it's pretty funny, well, my first interview to my second interview, I kinda realized it's really different, because, I was basically stating a bunch of facts in my first interview, and then my second interview, it's kinda like, I'm kinda going away from the facts, I'm kinda speaking about, like, about the

Secret War instead.

*SL:* Do you think are such things as facts about the Secret War?

*Isabelle:* Secret War? I think so, but, um, I don't think anything was written down or recorded, just because it was the Secret War, yeah.

*SL:* So it doesn't – there's not as many books or –

*Isabelle:* Yeah...very many facts about it...it's just from experience.

*SL:* So, do you think for something to be, like, history, like capital H, like history we learn in school, it has to be in textbooks, and it has to be written by, like, famous people, or experts?

*Isabelle:* Well, that is what I think, but I'm just kinda...since it is the Secret War, um, I think that matters kinda different. It's categorized in a different area, because...I don't know, it's just because...because, well, because, because, I have family members who've been a part of it.

Isabelle is uncertain about whether or not the Secret War is even included in the official history of this era. She seems to see the facts from her textbook as being wholly and completely apart from the experiences of her family, and that the stories from her family exist differently. While Isabelle struggles to articulate what makes this history different, she touches on an important and salient idea. She – like her peers – feels a fundamental difference between this history and other histories, due to her heritage connection.

Isabelle's responses suggest that in order for students to know that "their" history can be as important and "factual" as the history they find in their textbooks, teachers need to explicitly include the pieces and parts of history which reflect their students'

experiences and their families' experiences within the official history presented in schools. While historians and history teachers may recognize that historical "facts" are often distilled and disaggregated and watered-down pieces of others' experiences, this is not clear to Isabelle.

### **Putting the Puzzle Together**

The focal students felt that the combination of information they learned from their families and school helped them to construct more complete narratives. Several students made comments during their second interviews that indicated that the Vietnam War lessons helped to clarify their understanding of this complex, murky history. During his second interview, Brandon again emphasized his family, citing his grandfather and father as important people in the Vietnam War. When asked how he saw what he learned from his family and from school fitting together, he described it as "like a puzzle piece that was put together." He was able to give a brief outline of the war:

What led up to the Vietnam War was...basically Communism of North Vietnam, since at that time there was North and South Vietnam. And then, Secret War, I think...it was just...I think the war just like disturbed the Hmong people around that time. And I guess it was just disturbing, yeah.

He elaborated a few minutes later: "Yeah, it kinda just messed up everything, since they were just in the middle, even though they didn't do anything...until General Vang Pao was...until he was involved in the war." While this narrative is still spotty, Brandon demonstrates an understanding that the conflict between North and South Vietnam was

linked to the Secret War, which impacted the Hmong people and was related to General Vang Pao's leadership.

One way in which three of the four students "put the puzzle together" was through their discussion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail during their second interviews. Either the name of the trail or its existence were new pieces of information for the students, and seemed to help provide missing links in the students' thinking between the Vietnam War, the Secret War, and their parents' exodus from Southeast Asia. It is possible that the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was used by the Viet Minh to route supplies and personnel through Laos and Cambodia to South Vietnam, provides the students with a concrete connection between the Vietnam War and the Secret War. In other words, it seems that learning about the Ho Chi Minh Trail helped the Hmong students to better understand the connection between Hmong people and the Vietnam War. Isabelle discussed this link during her second interview:

[Ms. Adams] could've done more about just talking a little bit more about the Secret War, because we pretty much spent three days talking about Vietnam War and she could have at least spent one day talking about Secret War. Just because...it kind of relates to Ho Chi Minh Trail and all, too.

Here, Isabelle sees the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which she had "heard about before, but it wasn't really clarified, until it was talked about in [Ms. Adams'] class," as relating to both the Vietnam War and the Secret War. By explicitly pointing out the connection between the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Laos, Ms. Adams both included the Hmong students' knowledge of the Secret War in the official classroom story of the Vietnam War and

provided a concrete, tangible, visible link between the course curricula and the stories Hmong students had heard from their families. As one of the issues students struggled with when putting together narratives was the connection between the Hmong experience in the Secret War and the event known as the Vietnam War, it seems of particular interest to this study that the students identified this physical link that may, in some way, represent the narrative link for which they were searching.

There is a contradiction in the way the students talk about the war – they often noted that they didn't really know what happened, yet also discussed having heard stories from family. Theresa talked about her father's "most famous story" – which chronicled his harrowing journey swimming across the Mekong River with his younger sister (who could not swim) tied to his waist with a rope – with the fondness and exasperation of a teenager who has heard a story from her parents one too many times. Isabelle, who did not share many of her family's stories during our interviews, also discussed hearing stories from her family so many times she "just blurred them out."

The relationship between students' understanding of the Vietnam War and their identity seem, in some ways, mediated by what they learned in school about the war. While they tended to know that the Vietnam War was important and was "why we're here" during their first interviews, their understandings were broadened and deepened by what they learned in Ms. Adams' class. Their new knowledge about the role of U.S. government, in particular the presidents, in the recruitment, training, and ultimate abandonment of the Hmong helped the students make sense of a history they alternately



described as “fuzzy” or “blurry.” In this way, the school knowledge helped the students construct more solid and logical narratives about the war.

### **Meaning, Connection, and Impact**

In addition to investigating how Hmong students construct narratives about the Vietnam War, this study also seeks to examine the meanings students attach to these narratives. In this section, I examine some of the different meanings the focal students attached to this event. While each student spoke about the war in a different way and, in many ways, developed singular and personal meanings about and connections with the past, there are several themes which bridge across the students’ narratives. Perhaps most pervasive, not surprisingly, was an understanding that the Vietnam War was clearly tied to their families’ emigration to the U.S. – in other words, the Vietnam War is “why [they’re] here.”

Students often linked this primary understanding with a desire to decrease racism towards Hmong people, and with the idea that the U.S. bears a responsibility for the Hmong becoming refugees. In fact, they seemed to see these relationships on a timeline – the threat of Communism drew the U.S. into the Vietnam War, the U.S. then recruited, and subsequently abandoned, the Hmong to fight the Communists in the Secret War, which led to the anti-Communists (the Hmong and the U.S.) losing both wars and the Hmong needing to seek refuge outside of Laos (specifically Thailand), and the U.S. then bearing a responsibility to offer asylum to the Hmong refugees because the U.S. government involved the Hmong in the conflict in the first place. Therefore, according to the students, U.S. residents should welcome Hmong people because the Hmong fought

and died in place of U.S. soldiers. Within this historical construct, the students focused specifically on the relationship between the CIA and General Vang Pao, the leader of the Hmong people during and after the Secret War.

### **“Why We’re Here”**

Perhaps what is most interesting about the way the Hmong students understand the Vietnam War is that, despite spotty historical knowledge, they uniformly articulated a nuanced understanding of the impact and legacy of the war. Looking across the four students, what first becomes clear is that they demonstrate a clear linear understanding of this impact – that the Vietnam War led to the Hmong fleeing Laos and seeking refuge in the United States. As Theresa noted in her first interview, the Vietnam War is “why we’re here.” All four students noted that the Vietnam War is directly related to Hmong emigration to the United States, and that one of the primary reasons people (both Hmong and non-Hmong) should know about the war is so that everyone can understand what drove Hmong people to move to the U.S. The students spoke about this in different ways. Three of the four students personalized this link and discussed how, if not for the Vietnam War, they would not currently be living in the U.S. As Pa said during her first interview, “I mean, I think if it weren’t for the Vietnam War, I wouldn’t have... [come] to the U.S. when I was three months old.” Brandon commented on the direct link he sees between U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and the number of Hmong refugees currently residing in the U.S. during his first interview, “I think, if it wasn’t for the U.S. going in [to Vietnam], I mean obviously, like not a lot of Hmong people would be here.”

Students seem to see the impact of the Vietnam War on Hmong immigration to the United States as both historically and personally significant.

### **Decreasing Racism**

One of the reasons the students felt that non-Hmong people should understand this linkage is that they believe this understanding will lessen the prejudice Hmong people often still face in the U.S. Several of the students noted that their parents encountered racism when they first arrived in the U.S., and Brandon reported that he still sometimes experiences it. While Theresa did not discuss experiencing racism herself, during her first interview she noted: “I know there’s lots of racism – like, ‘why are all the Hmong people here, why are they taking over our city, taking all the food,’ so...I think it’s good for them to know why we’re here.” During her second interview, Pa commented specifically on the importance of people who are not Hmong learning about the role the Hmong played in the Secret War and the experiences of Hmong people during that time, “I think it would’ve been important [for people who are not Hmong to hear about] how the Vietnam War was for [Hmong people]...because, I think some people still question why there’s so many Hmong people here.” Brandon discussed both his own and his father’s experiences with racism, but did not make an explicit connection between these incidents and the importance of people who are not Hmong knowing about the Vietnam War. However, it seems that he may see a connection between the two. When asked during his second interview why he thought it was important for people who are not Hmong to know about the Vietnam War, Brandon focuses on the idea that

knowing about Hmong experiences during the war explains the Hmong presence in the U.S.:

...it's a pretty big change, immigrants of Hmong people coming here, it's like growing. So [if] people in the future ask, "where'd they come from?" If they learn about this, then I think they will know why – what happened. From the Vietnam War.

In this comment, Brandon echoes Theresa and Pa by noting that knowledge of the Hmong peoples' roles in the Vietnam and Secret Wars would help people understand why Hmong people sought refuge in the U.S., and therefore perhaps why the U.S. has a responsibility to welcome Hmong people.

### **U.S. Responsibility**

The students exhibited a fairly complex understanding of the relationship between U.S. involvement in both the Vietnam and Secret Wars, and Hmong emigration to the U.S. It is important to note that many of the comments students made about this relationship occurred during their second interviews. Brandon is the only exception to this, likely due to the fact that his first interview occurred after the first class session on the Vietnam War. This complex understanding is closely tied to, and sometimes overlaps with, the idea that learning about the Hmong experience in the Vietnam War may lead to decreased racism. However, the students did make distinctions between these two ideas, and therefore I present them separately. The students believe that one of the consequences of the Vietnam War was Hmong emigration to the U.S, and they expressed a desire for people who are not Hmong to learn about the Vietnam War in order to

understand this cause/effect relationship. They seemed to be concerned that people who are not Hmong did not understand the “push” factors of Hmong emigration – which is tied to their belief that if people understood the role Hmong people played in the Vietnam and Secret Wars, they would be less likely to hold prejudiced or racist views about Hmong people.

When asked why he thought it was important for people who are not Hmong to know about the Vietnam War, Brandon’s response indicated that he was working through this question. During his first interview, he said:

I think it is [important for people who aren’t Hmong to know about the Vietnam War and the Secret War], but not really, ‘cause...I think it just depends on if you care about what – how the war affected us or something like that. And...maybe they should, ‘cause, I mean, the U.S. was involved, Americans were involved in this war.

In this comment, Brandon indicates that he believes it is important for people who are not Hmong to know about the Vietnam War era, and talks himself through several reasons. Over the course of a few seconds, he verbalizes his thought process on this issue. After initially agreeing with the idea, he immediately disagrees, and then moves to the idea that people should know only if they cared about or were interested in the wars’ impact on the Hmong community. Finally, he decides that Americans should know, due to U.S. involvement in the wars. This suggests that U.S. involvement in the wars necessitates knowledge of both wars, and of the relationship between the Vietnam War and Hmong refugees in the U.S., on the part of Americans who are not Hmong.

During her second interview, Theresa also thought about what the U.S. government should have done toward the end of the Secret War:

I think the Secret War shouldn't have been kept such a secret because even if people were tired of it they had to know that there are these people out there helping out the Americans, and losing their lives because of it and that's why they're over here.

In this statement, Theresa very clearly explains why she thinks the general American public should have been apprised of the Secret War, and of the role Hmong people played in that war. She wants U.S. residents, including those who did not support U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia, to know that Hmong people fought and died in the place of U.S. soldiers in Laos.

Pa also discussed the relationship between the U.S. government and the Hmong people during her second interview:

I think [the United States] just wanted to get out of there as soon as possible, so they just – I think they felt that the Hmong were kinda already fighting off the Vietnamese themselves, so they just used the Hmong as a scapegoat so they could get out.

When I asked Pa how she felt about Hmong people being used as scapegoats by the U.S. government, she said that she thought it was “kinda mean.” Pa feels strongly that the United States unjustly dragged Hmong people into participating in a war, and echoes Theresa's sentiment that Americans should know that when Nixon pulled U.S. troops out of Southeast Asia, the fighting did not stop. Instead, Hmong soldiers continued to fight

the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. As Pa explains, the students had a sense that the U.S. left the Hmong to clean up or finish the fight, and they did not approve of this choice.

### **“The Happy Ending”**

Unsurprisingly, the students seemed to have conflicting views about the U.S. While they recognized, especially after they had learned about the Vietnam War in school, that the U.S. was partly responsible for Hmong people needing to flee Laos during and after the Secret War, they also echo generations of immigrants who relish the opportunities for education they have found in the United States. During her second interview, when asked to give the story of the Vietnam War, Pa said:

Well...I would probably start off with how the war started...And then probably the effect it had on the people, and what the people had to do, and what the Americans were doing, to help, and...how the people had to run. And then, how the Americans would help the people by getting them to America, and then – the happy ending (laughs).

Here, Pa repeats her mother’s story that of the three lives she’s lived – in Laos, in the refugee camp in Thailand, and in the U.S., the U.S. has been the best. Pa recorded this sentiment at the end of her essay documenting her mother’s story, and her mother also said the same thing during her interview.

Unlike her classmates, Isabelle did not highlight U.S. responsibility or negligence in recruiting or drawing Hmong people into the war. She focused on the benefits of growing up in the U.S. during her first interview:

I'm just sort of glad that I came to this country and actually had the opportunity to be here, because if it wasn't for that compromise that the Americans had with the Hmong people, then I don't think I would've been in the United States, so...yeah, [the Vietnam War] does mean a lot to me, because I get the opportunities I have here.

Brandon and Theresa also noted that they have more educational opportunities in the U.S. than they would have had in Laos or in a Thai refugee camp. Despite their ambiguous feelings regarding the U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, they have all been told that they have many more opportunities and advantages than their parents had.

### **Culture and Loss**

The students entered a nuanced discussion about the different reasons why Hmong people should understand the connections between the Vietnam War and Hmong emigration to the U.S. All of the students felt that it was important for themselves, as well as future generations, to know “where we come from.” In her first interview, Pa said: “I would teach [my kids] as much as I knew about [the story]. Because...not only should they understand the story, or they should know about it, they should at least know where we came from, and how we got here.” In his first interview, Brandon added, “If I have children or grandchildren, I think they should be – they should have the right to know about this, ‘cause it’s a part of who we are, it’s history, and it affected us.” Clearly, the Hmong students understood the impact the war had on Hmong people and wanted their children to develop this understanding as well.



Like some of her peers, Pa compared herself to her more-recently arrived cousins in her first interview, “comparing us Hmong people to my cousins that just came from Thailand and stuff, yeah it seems like they have more culture...they know more stuff about our culture than we do.” Pa seemed to sense that not only did her parents suffer during the war, but that becoming refugees and moving to the U.S. contributed to a loss of cultural knowledge and connection. Still, Pa felt a very strong connection between knowledge and interest in the Vietnam War, and what it means to be Hmong. When asked what she would say to a classmate who professed not to care about the Vietnam War, she responded “Well, if...I was there, I probably’d be like ‘well then you’re not Hmong!’” Here, Pa tries to articulate the connection she sees between being Hmong and caring about the Vietnam War. She sees interest and understanding of the Vietnam War as being a critical and crucial part of her Hmong identity.

In addition to the sentiments offered by Pa and Brandon, both Theresa and Isabelle thought it would be important for future generations to know about the war due to the increased Americanization of the Hmong community. As Theresa said during her first interview, “If I do have kids, I know I want to tell them, because more likely they’ll be more – they’ll be even more Americanized than I will be, so...I have a responsibility to tell my kids.” This comment echoes her feeling, as expressed during her second interview, that her younger siblings would feel less connected to and interested in this event than she does, “knowing that they’re probably younger than I am, they probably won’t be as interested. Probably think, ‘oh, it’s just a war, another war to look at,’ read something about it, toss it over their heads.” Theresa, the oldest of six children, seemed

to see herself as a generational stepping stone between her parents and her younger siblings. She recognized that her parents had the deepest connection to the Vietnam War during her first interview: “Truthfully, I don’t feel that big of a connection because I’m not, I wasn’t there at the time, but I feel some sort of connection because I am Hmong and my parents have gone through it.” Yet, as she noted in her second interview (see above), she thinks that since her sisters will be coming of age in a world even further removed from the Vietnam War, they will be less interested in learning about this subject. For this reason, Theresa believes that it is important for her siblings, and her own future children, to hear about the Vietnam War and how it led to her family settling in the U.S.

During her first interview, Isabelle, like Theresa the oldest child in her family, expressed the idea that it would be important for Hmong people to know the story of the Vietnam War:

Yeah, for the newer generations, because they’ll be the ones having a harder time because they won’t be knowing their original language, and then they’ll have to try to learn new stuff, and, it’ll be really nice if they know about the past, too. And care about it, actually. Because, for me, I don’t really, really care about it that much, so if I don’t really, really care about it that much, I’m pretty sure the new generation, they won’t care about it at all.

Isabelle’s comments are striking for several reasons. First, she is the only Hmong participant who professed not to care about the war. Still, she felt that this knowledge and interest would be important for future generations who would be further removed from this event. She seems to differentiate between those who profess to care about the

past, and those who actually care. Like Theresa, she may feel distance from the war because it was so integral to her parents' lives and far less tangible in her own. This may be what is influencing her construction of a scale of caring. Alternately, she may have internalized the messages she had received about the importance of this event to the Hmong community, but had not formed those bonds for herself. Perhaps because her parents were younger than her peers' parents during the war and were born in refugee camps, or perhaps due to a higher degree of assimilation, Isabelle does not feel that her family has taught her to "really, really truly care" about the war which seems to matter so much to her peers.

### **Conclusion**

Students invariably described having a connection to the Vietnam War, though the way they talked about it differed significantly between students. They noted that without the war, they would not have moved to the U.S. and used the language of many first and second generation immigrants in discussing the opportunities they have in the U.S. (primarily regarding education). However, they also noted the loss of culture in a variety of ways, particularly not speaking Hmong as well as their parents and not knowing all the customs and rituals that their more recently arrived cousins did. The Vietnam War has many meanings for these students – some quite positive and some which acknowledge the difficulty, suffering, and loss they and their families have felt as a result of their emigration. As they attribute the emigration directly to the war, they discuss all aspects of this complicated transition fluidly.

During her first interview, Pa articulated the complexity of what it means to understand the Vietnam War:

I mean, I think if it weren't for the Vietnam War, I wouldn't have...came to the U.S. when I was three months old, and I wouldn't have...received my education, but then again, it has a downside because...I don't know much about it, and...I don't know, there's just like a big part of me that has Vietnam War written on it, but then there's nothing inside of it (giggles).

A few minutes later, she added a layer to her metaphor: "It's like a bottle labeled with Vietnam War on it, and then, it's not – it's not halfway full." Here, Pa very eloquently summarizes her feelings, and those of her classmates. They have a very clear sense of the impact of the war, but they are not always sure what actually happened. Pa's metaphor of the empty bottle is helpful here, as it seems that the information she learned from Ms. Adams was added to what she had learned from her parents and helped to fill the bottle. This information worked in tandem with what she had heard from her community – it added to and enriched Pa's understanding of an event which holds deep, significant, and troubling meaning for her. Even Isabelle, who did not feel a connection to the Vietnam War during the first interview, began to see how the Vietnam War and Secret War were somewhat connected, and therefore, connected her to both her heritage self and her school self.

## Cultural Revolution Case: Introduction

Teaching about the People's Republic of China, including the Cultural Revolution and the reign of Mao Zedong, is included both in national history standards<sup>11</sup> and California state history-social science content standards<sup>12</sup>. At Franklin High School, in suburban Los Angeles, this history is included in a 9<sup>th</sup> grade Modern World History course. Teachers and textbooks often focus on the Cultural Revolution as one in a series of reforms and programs implemented by Mao and his regime. A hypothetical unit might begin with a discussion of the battle for power in post-World War II China between Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang (nationalists), led by Chiang Kai-Shek. The teacher may then focus on the reforms Mao implemented with the intention of empowering Chinese peasants, such as land reforms and the First Five Year Plan. Also covered would be China's involvement in the Korean War, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, perhaps the most well-known of Mao's programs. After discussing the in-fighting and machinations of the Chinese Communist Party and the impact of the reforms on the Chinese people, the teacher would move on to Mao's death and China under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. The teacher might also talk about the Tiananmen Square protests in the summer of 1989 which were brutally suppressed by the Chinese government, and after which the government further relaxed some economic regulations.

This chronological approach to modern Chinese history is similar to those of other nations' histories as taught in U.S. high schools. However, by focusing primarily on the

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<sup>11</sup> <http://nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf>

actions of Mao and other government or party officials, this typical chronology may not engage students in an examination of the experiences of ordinary Chinese people living during that time. This omission is particularly important when the students are themselves of Chinese descent, as is the case at Franklin High School, where at least half of the student population identifies as Chinese American. As the number of students in U.S. classrooms with Chinese heritage grows, it is critical that teachers remember that their students' ancestors experienced this time in many ways and therefore have a wide variety of opinions and stories about China both past and present.

### **Review of Literature: Modern China Curriculum**

There is a relatively small body of research that looks at the teaching and learning of modern Chinese history in U.S. schools. The majority of this work focuses on what teachers should do when planning and teaching a unit on modern China. In 2010, *Social Education* published a special issue that focused on teaching about China that aimed to “provide articles based on recent scholarship and personal experience that offer perspectives on China and its people different from those found in most American textbooks” (Masalski & Levy, 2010, p. 7). Several articles illustrated the complexities of modern Chinese history and laid out ideas for lessons that would help engage and motivate students to grapple with these grey areas. For example, Lee (2010) suggests films that teachers may use to accurately convey the progress, challenges, and struggles of both modern and historical China. Lee’s short critiques of the films provide a snapshot of the myriad stories teachers could tell in their history classrooms; they could focus on the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square uprising, student life in China, or the

lives of Chinese workers. While Lee focuses on films as a curricular resource, she also demonstrates the many options teachers have when thinking about how they want to structure their units on modern China.

Stapleton (2010), a professor of Asian Studies, developed five themes with which she suggested secondary teachers should teach about China. The five themes are: 1) the significance of Maoism, 2) experiments in governance, 3) economic development, 4) conformity and diversity, and 5) China's foreign relations and global impact. Stapleton's themes focus on the lingering impacts of both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping which illustrates the importance of conducting a deep, thorough study of China that allows students to view Chinese history from different perspectives and to develop understandings about the connections between China's past and its present.

Other work has also exhorted teachers to provide students with the opportunity to study modern China from multiple perspectives. Kiernan (1991) published an article shortly after the Tiananmen Square protests arguing for the inclusion of this recent event in social studies curricula. Kiernan focused on using the event as a gateway to looking at past rebellions in China, and as a way for students to interrogate the impact and effects of the Mao era and the era following his reign. Armstrong and Desrosiers (2012) provide teachers two frameworks for conducting a thematic study of the French Revolution, Russian Revolution, and Chinese Cultural Revolution. The first framework is based on the work of historian Crane Brinton's stages of revolution and the second on historian Theda Skocpol's work on the motivating factors behind revolutions. Armstrong and Desrosier present the two frameworks and detail how they may be used to design a unit

of study for high school students that moves beyond the traditional chronological teaching of history and engages students in more rigorous disciplinary work. In so doing, they also present an option for teachers that would engage students in examining and investigating the Cultural Revolution from multiple viewpoints.

The one exception to the focus on teachers and teaching is Kohlmeier's (2005) study of her students' development of historical thinking skills focused on three historical eras – including the Cultural Revolution. Kohlmeier's focus was not specifically on the teaching and learning of the Cultural Revolution. However, Kohlmeier's choice to use the memoir *Red Scarf Girl* by Ji Li Jiang in her 9<sup>th</sup> grade world history class shows that, at least in Kohlmeier's classroom, the Cultural Revolution was taught in a way that allowed students to view the time period from multiple perspectives. As the memoir was written by a woman who had lived through the Cultural Revolution as a young girl, it chronicled her journey from being a supporter of Mao to questioning some of the leader's practices. After using a variety of methods that she hoped would engage her students in developing the ability to see history from multiple perspectives (including the use of reading webs, Socratic seminars, and the writing of historical narratives by students), Kohlmeier concluded that her students developed the ability to think more critically about the past, consider multiple perspectives, and allow for nuance and complexity when contemplating history. Here, Kohlmeier demonstrates that some of the previously mentioned curricular suggestions, ideas, and plans may work well in history classrooms.



## Setting, Curriculum, and Participants

### Franklin High School and Mr. Larson

Franklin High School is located in Elmdale, a relatively large suburb situated approximately seventeen miles east of downtown Los Angeles. Franklin High School's sprawling suburban campus, including several athletic fields and field houses, faces the municipal golf course and tennis courts. Like many schools in temperate climates, the classrooms are linked by outdoor corridors and students are often found socializing in the many small courtyards and outdoor spaces between classes, during lunch, and before and after school. The school buildings were undergoing renovation in March, 2011, during the three weeks I spent in Elmdale. The recently completed main office building was airy and professional – the school entrance could easily have doubled for a modern office building or the lobby of an internet start-up firm. Franklin is the only comprehensive high school in the Elmdale Unified School District.

On the 2010 U.S. census, 59% of Elmdale's 56,364<sup>13</sup> residents identified as Asian and 44% percent of those residents identified as Chinese. Franklin's total student population was 3,610 during the 2009-2010 school year (the most recent year for which such data is available); 69% of students are Asian/Pacific Islander.<sup>14</sup> As the majority of Elmdale residents who identify as Asian also identify as Chinese, it is likely that the majority of Asian students at Franklin identify as Chinese. As Mr. Larson showed me around on my first day at Franklin, he half-jokingly referred to the school as "the original Tiger Mom school," referencing a recently-released book (Chua, 2011) that had come

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<sup>13</sup> <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://nces.ed.gov/>

under scrutiny for its portrayal of Chinese parenting attitudes and techniques. The book seemed to enforce the stereotype of Chinese (and Asian parents in general) as very strict and having very high academic expectations for their children.<sup>15</sup>

Mr. Larson is a White man in his middle fifties with a quick laugh and genuine love for both historical content and the teaching of history. Mr. Larson was very enthusiastic about this study and was generous with his personal and class time during the weeks I spent in Elmdale. During both his formal interview and our informal talks before and after class, his passion for history was apparent. Teaching is a second career for Mr. Larson, who was in his fifteenth year in the classroom during the 2010-2011 school year. He runs a fairly teacher-centered classroom and relied heavily on documentaries during his modern China unit. However, he was also conscious of his student population and knew that the stories that might come into his classroom via his students were unique. He wanted to honor his students' families' experiences and had a profound respect for the knowledge students could contribute to the larger classroom conversation. In giving examples of former students who had told stories about their families' participation in the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 from both the student protestor and government perspectives, he commented:

It's great, you get the different perspectives, I think personally - I get this big overview that...I don't think you could find anywhere else in the country, almost, I mean there might be a few other places like this, but, not too many places could I get these kinds of stories from my students. And it's very valuable.

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<sup>15</sup> For a more nuanced discussion of the different expectations set by teachers in U.S. schools and Chinese or Chinese American parents, see Cheng (1999). For a critical examination of the impact of the "model minority" stereotype on Asian American students, see Ng, Lee, & Pak (2007).

Knowing that his students may come from different backgrounds and have different ideas about China's past, Mr. Larson was careful to be evenhanded in his portrayal of modern China. For example, he told a story about meeting Lu Houmin, who was both the grandfather of one of his former students and Mao's photographer. Mr. Larson explained that while he had learned about the violent and repressive aspects of Mao's reign while growing up, Lu Houmin provided a different view of Mao when he visited Mr. Larson's class. When discussing Mao during class time, Mr. Larson told his students the story of meeting Lu Houmin and emphasized, as he did during his formal interview, that: "according to Lu Houmin, who I spoke to, you know, Mao really genuinely cared about the Chinese people." Meeting Lu Houmin, Mr. Larson told his students, gave him a different perspective on Mao.

Franklin operates on a traditional semester schedule with six 50-minute periods each school day. Modern World History is a year-long course typically taken by 9th grade students and Mr. Larson taught several sections of the course. Of the eight students who participated in this study, four (Grace, Lin, Naomi, Olivia) were in Mr. Larson's second period Modern World History class and four (Calvin, Emily, Joseph, and Zachary) were in the sixth period class. Therefore, I observed both second and sixth hour for the duration of the modern China unit, which lasted five days. I also observed the sixth period class on the Friday prior to the start of the unit, as Mr. Larson had invited me to see how he "set up" the unit.

Mr. Larson's classroom was bright and airy, with rows of tables and chairs facing the front of the classroom. A SmartBoard along the front wall was the centerpiece of the

classroom, and most instruction was focused on the board. Mr. Larson had constructed a long teacher's desk out of several smaller desks and a table. A laptop computer sat on one end of the table and was connected to the SmartBoard, while a desktop computer sat on the other end of the table and served as Mr. Larson's personal computer. I sat at the desktop computer during my observations, in order to have the best view of the room without disrupting the classroom. Mr. Larson often kept the lights low, and the room was a comfortable and welcoming space for students. Along the walls and on the ledge under the windows, Mr. Larson had posters and artifacts representing the different units he taught. He had quite a few mementos from China and other Asian countries, some of which he had collected himself while travelling and some of which were gifts from former students. These mementos again demonstrate Mr. Larson's sensitivity to and awareness of his students' heritage.

### **Modern China Unit**

Mr. Larson included his teaching of the Cultural Revolution in a broader examination of China from 1949-1989. Each week, Mr. Larson would post an entry to his class blog which highlighted interesting aspects of the upcoming week's work, assigned readings in the class textbook, and allowed students to contribute to the conversation in the comments section. In the blog post previewing the week on modern China, Mr. Larson wrote: "Our focus this week will be on China, and we will learn about the development of China as a nation from the time of Mao and the Cultural Revolution of the sixties to Tiananmen Square of 1989." Important events which were highlighted during the week included the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Cultural Revolution,

Mao's death, the ascension of the Gang of Four, the opening of China to the west, and the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

Mr. Larson relied on video documentaries for the majority of the week. For the first two and a half days, students viewed a documentary called *The Mao Years*.<sup>16</sup> The documentary chronicled the various reforms implemented under Mao, including land reforms, the Hundred Flowers Campaign, and the Cultural Revolution. It also discussed the techniques used by the regime to persecute its internal enemies, including the use of “struggle meetings,” at which landlords and other members of the upper class were attacked and forced to “criticize” themselves. Finally, the film discussed the rise of the Gang of Four and the power struggles within the Chinese communist party towards the end of Mao's rule, and ended with Mao's death. Mr. Larson would periodically stop the movie in order to allow students time to catch up on the attendant study guide, to ask students comprehension questions about what they had just seen, or to emphasize a point made in the film. On the fourth day, Mr. Larson showed the PBS documentary *The Tank Man*,<sup>17</sup> which chronicled the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and aftermath, as well as profiling the economic advancements in China since 1989. On the fifth day, students were given the entirety of the class period to work on the summative assessment for the unit – an essay which asked students to “display knowledge of key events in China's modern history,” “have at least one paragraph which gives [their] opinion of China's modern history,” and “give [their] conclusions about modern China with

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<sup>16</sup> “The Mao Years” was produced by Ambrica Productions in 2008. Information available at: <http://www.ambrica.com/themaoyears.html>.

<sup>17</sup> “The Tank Man” was produced for the PBS program *Frontline* in 2006. Information available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/>.

recommendations of how China can be improved.” Students were encouraged to embellish their essays with artwork.

Students were also assigned a textbook reading for the week in their class text, *Glencoe World History – Modern Times*. The 11-page section covered Mao’s rise to power, the Great Leap Forward, the Red Guards, and the Cultural Revolution in the first two pages. There was a pre-reading that was not assigned at the beginning of the chapter, though it is possible that students read it as well. It focused on the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989.

### **Student Profiles**

I chose five of the eight participating students to highlight in this chapter. I did this for two reasons. First, qualitative research prizes depth over breadth (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000), and focusing on a smaller number of students allows for a more in-depth examination of their thoughts, words, and ideas. Second, I wanted to maintain parity with the other two cases presented in this study, and therefore chose to focus on a smaller number of students in this chapter. I chose these five students after carefully coding the interviews and essays of all eight students; and the words and ideas of these five students accurately represent the themes derived from all data collected for this case.

**Calvin.** Calvin is a lanky, bespectacled 14 year old freshman with a sardonic sense of humor. He sat in the middle of Mr. Larson’s classroom during sixth period, and spent much of his time turning around in his seat to chat with classmates. While Mr. Larson often grew frustrated with Calvin’s seeming disinterest in the class, Calvin was

thoughtful, honest, and earnest during our interviews. He is a burgeoning artist who carefully drew manga characters throughout his interviews. In his first interview, he took pride in being “a guy who’s sentimental” and seemed to be working out what it means to be, as he described himself, “American born Chinese.” The older of two children, Calvin was born and raised in Southern California.

**Joseph.** Joseph is a serious 14 year-old boy in the sixth period class. In his interviews, Joseph spoke very quietly and quickly, sometimes swallowing the end of his sentences. In class, he often talked and joked with his neighbors and fidgeted with his pen while watching the documentaries. Born in China, Joseph emigrated to the U.S. with his family when he was ten. He was quick to answer Mr. Larson’s questions about what China is like now. On the day I solicited participants from his class, Joseph immediately raised his hand and, when I called on him, told me that I should interview him because he had recently moved here from China. Clearly proud of his heritage, Joseph struggled to assimilate new information about China into the picture he held of his birthplace.

**Lin.** Lin is a studious, thoughtful, intelligent 14 year-old girl in the second period class. Born in the U.S., she grew up in Southern California with her parents and older brother. She kept to herself in class, though she was quick to laugh or roll her eyes during interviews. Lin’s family had told her many stories about their experiences living under communist rule in China. She apparently thought carefully and critically about the past before being interviewed for this project.

**Naomi.** Naomi is an opinionated, smart, funny 14 year-old girl in the second period class. She moved to the U.S. at the age of ten with her parents, and was quiet in

class, possibly due to a lack of confidence in her English language skills. During her interviews, however, she was very talkative and expressive. Like Lin, her family had told her about their experiences under Mao, and she was excited to share her opinions during the interviews.

**Olivia.** Olivia, a 15 year-old girl who had emigrated to the U.S. at the age of ten to live with her mother, was bubbly and effusive both inside and outside her second period World History class. Her big smile and friendly attitude belied a serious and thoughtful girl who was very unsure of her opinions during her first interview. Olivia had ostensibly lived with her father in China as a small child, though she spent most of her time staying with a teacher at her school. As she said during her first interview, “I didn’t really have a family.” Therefore, unlike her peers, Olivia had not learned much about her family history. She seemed hungry for knowledge about the past and, in turn, for a more solid connection to her family and her heritage.

### **Student Narratives**

The Chinese students proved an interesting and unique case. Unlike the other two groups, the focal event for the Chinese students did not impact all Chinese people in the same way. This is not to minimize or mitigate the varied, unique, distinct experiences of Hmong people during the Vietnam War or of Jewish people during the Holocaust. Instead, it is to say that Chinese people before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution were both persecutor and persecuted, oppressor and oppressed, ruler and ruled in a way that would not have been possible during the other events. Therefore, the experiences of the parents and grandparents of the focal students varied in a different way. Additionally,



three of the students (Joseph, Naomi, and Olivia) were born in China and immigrated to the United States with their families when they were nine or ten years old. The other two students, Calvin and Lin, are second generation immigrants. All five students discussed communicating regularly with family in China and visiting on a regular basis. The strong ties these students have with the country of China impact their understanding of Chinese history.

### **“Dinner Table Conversation”**

Unsurprisingly, the Chinese students reported hearing about the Cultural Revolution from their parents and other family members, and none discussed learning about it in school in the United States. The three students who went to elementary school in China mentioned that they may have learned about Mao in school in China. Some families discussed the Cultural Revolution more than others, and there were therefore some students who had relatively limited knowledge while others had a fairly broad understanding of this event prior to learning about it in school.

Lin, for example, described her family’s discussion of the Cultural Revolution as “dinner table conversation.” She was able to give a detailed account of her family’s experiences during the Cultural Revolution and to give an overview of the bureaucratic and governmental aspects of the event. Lin began her first interview by naming important people involved in the Cultural Revolution: “Chairman Mao? And then the Gang of Four, I think, and the Red Guards” and then gave a “basic summary:”

Chairman Mao wanted to reform China, so he basically thought to throw away all of the old ideas, like the Confucius ideas, I think? And, he basically – I think he

took land away from landlords and gave it to peasants and he had these struggle meetings, where he told people to basically, I don't know, hit the rich people and torture them. And then I think it ended with Lin Biao, do you know him? I don't know how to pronounce it in English... Yeah, and I think it ended with his death, 'cause he was trying to flee to Soviet or Russia, or Taiwan maybe.

Like several of her peers, Lin was also able to recount stories she had heard from her parents and grandparents about their lives under Mao. She recounted two stories with a similar theme – the need to hide wealth from authorities. She told how her mother “bought a bike, and she had to hide it under the bed, because they weren't allowed to have luxuries such as bikes and stuff.” Lin visits her grandmother in Canton almost every summer, and in fact her grandmother was visiting Lin's family in California at the time of Lin's first interview. This close relationship clearly means a lot to Lin, and Lin recounted several of her grandmother's stories during her first interview:

She had to bury a lot of the family's jewelry in the mud in her backyard, because if she was caught with it, she would be arrested. And she couldn't buy a lot of stuff, because you just couldn't look like you're wealthy back then. And, what else? There were a lot that she told me... Oh yeah, and then when people gave her presents, they used to give each other rice and stuff, like bags of rice, and she couldn't accept it because she was scared that if she accepted it, she would be classified as being “wealthy,” and if you were classified as being wealthy, then you would be stripped away of all your stuff.

Lin's narrative of the Cultural Revolution during her first interview is interesting for several reasons. First, it is important to note that the primary theme of her "basic summary" is mirrored in the stories she heard from her mother and grandmother – that Mao's policies and campaigns, including the Cultural Revolution, were class-based endeavors which sought to punish the wealthy, or those perceived as being wealthy. This means that Lin went into Mr. Larson's classroom with a relatively solid and historically accurate understanding of Mao's China. Second, Lin's close relationship with her grandmother, as well as her family's focus on the Cultural Revolution during daily conversation, have had a long-lasting impact on Lin. She has remembered these stories and conversations and is able to coherently relate them to a relative stranger. This implies that she has internalized and accepted these stories as truth.

Much like Lin, Naomi gave an overview of the Cultural Revolution and described her families' experiences during that time. Unlike Lin, Naomi had immigrated to the United States four years prior to her participation in this study. Naomi's initial explanation of the Cultural Revolution revealed the very real way in which she sees how this history has impacted her family:

Mao Zedong wants to take the rich people's property and when my grandparents experienced the Cultural Revolution, 'cause my grandfather, he was a professor in the university in Beijing. So, Mao wants to get rid of the educated people, like if you are highly educated, he wants to get rid of you because he [doesn't] want other people to be more powerful than him, so he basically, he took my grandparents' property, took all the money, and the furniture and took all the

valuable things and my grandfather, because of this, he went from Beijing to this little city that I was born [in], and he learned other things, and he want[ed] to pretend that he's not a professor, so Mao won't put him in jail or catch him.

Here, Naomi explains very clearly how she sees how Mao's anti-intellectual campaigns having a very real impact on her family. She later talked about how she had lived with her grandparents in China, and was excited that they were coming to stay with her and her parents for several months.

In class, Naomi was a very quiet, reserved girl and she repeatedly apologized for what she perceived to be her lack of English proficiency during our interview. Yet she was able to articulate complex connections with relative ease. In talking about her family and what they had told her about the past, Naomi stated in her first interview that her grandparents had taught her "all about" the Cultural Revolution and Mao's reign. She also commented that her grandfather "is really involved in this, he'll talk about the politics all the time, like about Mao and in China and the Cultural Revolution, what that did to them." A few minutes later, when asked what she thought her family wanted her to remember about the Cultural Revolution, Naomi placed her family's story in clear opposition to the story she had learned in elementary school in China:

I think they just want me to know about the truth about China's government, 'cause the elementary school that I went to in China, all they tell us is how Mao is good. And Mao is the best person in all China. So I just knew he was a good person, but actually he's not that good. So, my parents told me the truth, and –

before I just know Mao is a good person ‘cause the school just told you that. You can’t talk negative things about him.

A few minutes later, she added: “I think the citizens, they all know that Mao is not what the school taught you about that person.” Clearly, Naomi’s family had a profound effect on her understanding of history. This can be seen not only in the stories she told about her grandparents’ experiences during the Cultural Revolution, but also when she discussed learning about Mao in elementary school in China.

During her second interview, Naomi reiterated her understanding of Chinese citizens’ political thinking, which shows her sophisticated understanding of both the past and the representation of the past in present-day China:

‘Cause China, like I said, you can’t put the truth about politics in China. We all know about it, the politics, you can’t talk about it, like the negative part, so you can only talk about it when you are in other countries, like in U.S.

Her statements demonstrate the importance of Naomi’s family in helping her understand the past and to make sense of the different stories she had heard about the past. Naomi and Lin both provide powerful examples of students who come to their history classroom with a deep connection to this history through their grandparents.

### **“I’m Not Entirely Sure”**

When asked to explain the Cultural Revolution during their first interviews, some students were initially unsure about what – exactly – happened during the Cultural Revolution. Calvin said: “I’m not entirely sure what the most important events related to the Cultural Revolution are, but maybe Tiananmen Square demonstration and the tanks

rolling in and stuff.” Later in his first interview, he told a story about his uncle and grandmother:

I heard from my folks, my mom and dad, that my uncle, after he finished high school, he wanted to go to college but he couldn't 'cause Mao sent him to work on farms and stuff, and my grandma, who was a doctor, also got sent to farms to help the people there – it was like health care back then, but not as good.

Here, Calvin seems to know some of his family's experiences during the Cultural Revolution, but cannot necessarily connect the term “Cultural Revolution” with his uncle's and grandmother's farm labor during the Cultural Revolution.

Olivia responded much like Calvin when asked about important events and people related to the Cultural Revolution during her first interview. While Calvin was born in the United States, Olivia was born in China and emigrated to the U.S. when she was nine. She explained her ignorance about the Cultural Revolution by saying: “My mom never really talked about the Cultural Revolution, so...I don't know much about it.” She knew that her mother or grandmother may have more knowledge, but that knowledge had not yet been passed on to her. Later during her first interview, she was able to give a bit more background about the Cultural Revolution: “I know it has something to do with Mao...and...if you're in the country for a long time, like ten years.” When I asked her what else she had heard about Mao, Olivia shared that “He was a communist, and I think he started the revolution 'cause he was scared that people were gonna take his power away from him.” While she could not necessarily relate family stories, like her peers,

Olivia was still able to give a basic description of the Cultural Revolution and of Mao based on what she had heard from her family.

It is important to note that Olivia's early childhood was somewhat dissimilar from her peers. Her parents divorced when she was young and she was left in her father's care. However, her father was not able to be a full-time caregiver and Olivia lived with a teacher until she was nine. At that time, she was sent to the U.S. to live with her mother. While her peers grew up with at least one parent as a full-time caregiver and many had formed close bonds with extended family members as well, Olivia did not have these bonds and was therefore less likely to hear family stories.

Olivia was confused about Chairman Mao, and expressed this confusion during her first interview:

I hear from my family, he's a great leader, and then I read books and stuff, and what the TV talks about sometimes, and then, it would be like China was threatened and stuff, and the revolution - everyone was treated badly, and - I just don't get how that works. If he's a good person, why would he let that happen to his country?

Here, Olivia grapples with an interesting and important question. Perhaps what she meant earlier in her interview, when she said she did not know much about the Cultural Revolution, was that she had not yet developed an answer to her question about how a good person – as she had heard Mao described – could let bad things happen to his country.

For Olivia, being confused and unsure about what happened in the past perhaps led to her inability to answer the initial interview prompts. In her first interview, she tried to make sense of the past, but did not have the same tools with which to do so as some of her classmates. This confusion was echoed in a comment she made in class on the third day of the Modern China unit. Olivia asked Mr. Larson a question at the beginning of the class period: “Do you think Mao is a great leader?” Mr. Larson demurred, stating that this is something he wants her and her classmates to think about, and once the students have decided for themselves, he will share his own opinion. By asking this question, it seems that Olivia was actively searching for someone to help her make sense of the past and to determine if Mao was, in fact, a great leader, as she had learned in China.

### **The Modern China Unit and the Development of Multiple Perspectives**

Perhaps most interesting was the Chinese students’ tendency to see conflicting or disparate accounts of the past as offering new or different perspectives. This became very clear during the students’ second interviews, when they were integrating family knowledge with what they had learned in school. For several of the students, this meant that their perceptions of Chairman Mao shifted after learning about him in their World History class. For example, during her second interview, Lin explained:

The Cultural Revolution, because in the beginning, I just thought it was a terrible thing to go through, but then, I kind of see why Mao would do that...I mean, I guess he really did want a better country and it didn’t come out to that, so, I guess it wasn’t – I mean, his intentions at least weren’t so bad.



Here, Lin outlined her conception of the Cultural Revolution as told to her by her parents and grandparents. Like many Chinese people, they had suffered under Mao and therefore told Lin how “terrible” it was to live under Chairman Mao. However, learning more about Mao’s intentions in her World History class allowed Lin to develop a different perspective about that era. As she explains, she has neither replaced her parents’ stories with her school knowledge nor has she totally rejected the stories told in Mr. Larson’s class. Instead, she allows for both stories to exist, and she is therefore able to develop an understanding of the past that includes multiple perspectives.

While Lin had previously had a negative view of Mao and his policies, Joseph had previously had a fairly positive view of Mao and his policies. While Lin and Joseph were not in the same class period, they both had Mr. Larson as their ninth-grade World History teacher and therefore were exposed to the same curricular materials and lessons. It is impossible to know exactly why Lin and Joseph had very different ideas about Chinese history prior to studying it in their World History class; however, there are several contextual clues that may help us to better understand these students and their families. Joseph’s family was originally from Hunan, which was also Mao’s birthplace, and in his first interview Joseph described how his mother had benefitted from Mao’s leadership:

Well, my mom is from Hunan and she got [the] highest grade in her class [unintelligible] in Shanghai, and got into college, and I guess, if the communist[s] lost, then Hunan – that area would not be developed much at all and she wouldn’t

have been given the chance to go to Shanghai at all. And so I wouldn't be able to be here.

When asked to explain a bit more about why he thought Mao was his grandparents' "great hero," Joseph reiterated what he had been told by his family: "He led and freed the people, I guess. That's what they said. And also, they told me that he also made the people [have] less poverty, I think. They said that, and [he] made people happier in general." Therefore, it is clear that Joseph, who had immigrated to the United States approximately five years prior to participating in this study, had a positive image of Mao and Mao's impact on the lives of Chinese people. While during his second interview Joseph also discussed learning new perspectives about Mao, the perspectives he added to his understanding of Chinese history were understandably different from Lin's.

During his second interview, when asked about how the portrayal of Mao in his World History class was similar to or different from that of his family, Joseph replied:

It was kind of different, because, the ["Mao Years"] movie also made him look – like more on the neutral side, and like bad-ish, and when you're Chinese, you generally look good about Mao, and trust what he says.

I asked Joseph what he thought about this different portrayal, and he explained: "I think it's just a different perspective, that's all. Neither of them is completely right, but, just more information. Just a view on Mao." Here, Joseph seems to differentiate between the Chinese perspective and other – perhaps Western or American – perspectives. Still, despite his strong, positive feelings about Mao in his first interview, he does not dismiss

the “bad-ish” portrayal of his family’s hero. Instead, he reconstructs his narrative slightly in order to allow for this new perspective.

Like Joseph and Lin, Calvin’s picture of Mao was altered by what he learned in his World History class. Calvin had heard stories from his grandmother about the death of Chairman Mao, and Mao’s death was also discussed in the documentary film his history class watched. Calvin had a bit more trouble putting together what he heard from his grandmother and what he learned in class. During his second interview, Calvin talked about some of his conflicting ideas about Mao, and people’s reactions to Mao’s death: “I learned that the villages were all starving and stuff, but my grandma’s village was crying for Mao [when he died] and like – what? Didn’t he take all their food?” When asked to think more deeply about that disparity, Calvin was able to develop an explanation for the villagers’ tears, and in so doing, was able to create a narrative about Mao’s death which accommodated both his grandmother’s story and the story he learned in school:

Maybe some of them were just like “oh, we lost a leader, and, it’s just right that somebody cry for him, so ok, even if he stole our food, let it be us, ‘cause he’s still a human being and we gotta cry.”

Here, Calvin thinks about how people may have felt obligated to mourn a fallen leader even if they had suffered due to that leader’s policy decisions. Much like Lin and Joseph, he constructs and reconstructs his understanding of the past to allow for the multiple perspectives offered by his family and his teacher in a way that makes sense to him and what he knows of human nature. For Calvin, Lin, Joseph, and their peers, the deliberate acknowledgement and inclusion of multiple perspectives in their narratives of the

Cultural Revolution was necessary in order to accommodate the conflicting stories they heard from their families and from school.

### **“The Beijing Massacre Was So Sad”**

Interestingly, one of the parts of Chinese history that most affected students was not part of the Cultural Revolution. However, since Mr. Larson included the Cultural Revolution in a larger study of modern China, it is not surprising that students brought up other topics from that week during their second interviews. Several of the students were shocked, saddened, and troubled by the images and information they saw in the *The Tank Man* documentary, which chronicled the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. There are several reasons why this event may have made such an impression on the students. First, the documentary that was shown was well-made, included graphic and disturbing video of the crackdown on the square, and was in color. It is important not to underestimate the power of this media on the students. Second, the event was not well-known to the students prior to learning about it in school. Some of them had heard about it beforehand, but the imagery and details were new. All of the students knew of Mao prior to learning about him in Mr. Larson’s class, and though they learned new or conflicting information about him or his reign in Mr. Larson’s class, they were not emotionally disturbed by this information. Additionally, the documentary that was shown about Mao was less dynamic than the one about Tiananmen Square.

Olivia, who had grown up in China and felt strong ties to the country of her birth, immediately brought up the events of June, 1989 in her second interview:

I thought the Beijing massacre was so sad...I thought the government was not being fair at all, like they were all shooting at innocent people, and they didn't even know what was going on, they were just going to get their daughters, sons, their dead bodies, and then the army was just shooting at them. I thought that was really wrong.

I then asked Olivia if she had heard of the massacre before, and she replied: "I didn't know about the massacre before – I was so shocked." Olivia's initial reaction to the disturbing and bloody images she saw in the film seems grounded in a strong sense of right and wrong, and her objections stem from her empathy for the parents of the students who died in the name of democracy. Later in her second interview, Olivia brought up her wish for China to embrace democracy, though she has given up hoping that real political reform may happen in China. Her reasoning stems from her understanding of the Tiananmen Square massacre: "And the tanks, like the Tank Man and stuff, everyone got really scared and I don't think they want that to happen again. So no one is speaking up, so I don't think there will be democracy." Here, Olivia demonstrates that she both feels for the parents and students who suffered and died during the uprising, and can understand the chilling effect of the government's response to the rebellion on future protest movements.

Like Olivia, Naomi and Joseph were both affected by *The Tank Man* documentary. Naomi immediately referenced the film in her second interview when asked what information was new in her World History class about Chinese history. A sensitive and thoughtful young woman, Naomi had been told about the rebellion from her

grandparents, but had not before seen the images and video recordings. She commented that she hadn't seen "the real recording of it. I just heard stories, and it's amazing to me." When I asked her why it was amazing, she replied "'Cause, so many people and fires and the guns and the tanks...it's so violent." She continued a moment later by describing her feelings when she was watching the movie, "A lot of students and innocent people died, so...I was really sad." Naomi, also a recent immigrant, integrated her grandparents' stories with the images she saw in her World History class to form a more cohesive and powerful narrative about the Tiananmen Square protests.

Joseph had also heard about, but not seen, the rebellion. The opening line of Joseph's final essay for the unit shows that he is still in the process of putting together his prior knowledge about China with what he learned in class – including the Tiananmen Square protests: "China during this unit was very different to what was known to me." While Joseph does not delve into the differences in his essay, his responses during his second interview indicate that he was coming to terms with a flawed China. His understanding of the Tiananmen Square uprising after learning about it in class shows this movement:

Generally the Tiananmen event was kind of new to me, I just knew there was some event back there, but I didn't really know that it was *that* bloody-ish. And I didn't think the government would actually go *that* far...I think there was more peaceful ways to do it, instead of killing everybody there.

Here, Joseph's language shows that he is moving slowly towards a more complex understanding of Chinese history and of modern China. As a fairly recent immigrant

with fond memories of China and with strong ties to both the people and the land, seeing images that portray China in a less-than-perfect light is difficult for Joseph to assimilate within his original narrative.

For the most part, the Chinese students were able to construct narratives that allowed both their families' stories and the information they learned at school to be considered true. In part, this was due to their consideration that their parents and their school may have held different perspectives about the past, and that there was room for both perspectives in their narratives. It is also important to consider the reverence and authority Chinese culture grants educators (Cheng, 1999) – questioning or denying their teacher's views may not have been something these students felt comfortable doing. Finally, the age of the students is important to consider. These students were 14 and 15 years-old in their first year of high school. Their willingness to rebel against or push back against “official” knowledge – such as that they learned in school – may not have been as developed as their older peers.

### **Meaning, Connection, and Impact**

Some of the Chinese students did not afford great meaning or significance to the Cultural Revolution or other parts of Chinese history – they felt that the past was the past; it may be interesting or troubling but ultimately inconsequential in their lives. For most of the students, however, studying Chinese history in school caused a certain amount of confusion about what it means to be Chinese or of Chinese heritage. As previously stated, many of the students have close ties to China and to their Chinese heritage. They have visited China, are in contact with relatives who still live in China, speak Chinese,

and identify themselves as Chinese or Chinese American. In this section, I will examine how students made meaning of, and described their connections to, Chinese history. As the Tiananmen Square protests became an event of significance in the classroom, I also analyze students' connections to Chinese history through both the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square protest.

### **“It’s Part of My History”**

As expected, the Chinese students felt that knowing about Chinese history was an important part of their Chinese heritage. They expressed this sentiment during both their first and second interviews, and learning about Chinese history in school did not seem to alter this feeling. As Joseph said in his first interview: “it’s part of my history, part of the history of China, and part of me as well” when asked if he thought his parents and grandparents would want him to know about the Cultural Revolution. With this comment, he seems to imply that not only is this event important to know about and remember because it is part of China’s past, but also because the event has significance for both him and his family.

While Joseph was born and spent much of his life in China, Lin was born and raised in California. Still, Lin felt a connection to the Cultural Revolution in much the same way as Joseph. In her first interview, Lin said: “My parents lived through this time period, so I think I have a connection to it.” Later in her first interview, she elaborated on this idea by discussing her own interest in the subject: “I think it’s ‘cause I’m Chinese, so I like to know about it.” Finally during her first interview, she brought up the idea of having an emotional connection to the past that was directly linked to her Chinese



heritage when asked if the way she talks about the Cultural Revolution with someone who is Chinese is different from the way she would talk about it with someone who was not Chinese:

Yeah, I think it does. Because, I think although other people that aren't Chinese would sympathize with you if you talk about it, I don't think they really understand it, because they're not impacted by it...So I think when I talk to someone who's not Chinese about it, I probably wouldn't put my feelings in it, because – I think they don't feel the same way as I do.

With these words, Lin complicates what it means to connect with history through heritage. While she acknowledges the connection she feels to an event her parents and other family members experienced, she also tries to explain a deeper emotional connection to the event.

Calvin, who was also born in the U.S., described a similar emotional connection in his first interview. He originally stated that he didn't feel much of a connection to the Cultural Revolution, but later amended this statement by saying that he knew enough about the Cultural Revolution to “relate to it emotionally” and that he was a “guy who was sentimental about a lot of things” when asked why he felt it was important for Chinese people to know about the Cultural Revolution. Here, Calvin seems to echo Lin's idea about an emotional connection to the past as being part of a heritage connection.

Emotion also played a part in Olivia connecting her Chinese heritage to the Cultural Revolution, though in a slightly different way. Olivia, whose personal history is different from those of her peers as she spent much of her childhood living with a teacher

in China, said in her first interview: “[China] is my home country, so I’m always gonna be a part of it, support it. Like, if America and China went to war or something, I’ll probably be on China’s side. It’s just like, I don’t know, I’m attached.” Here, Olivia tries to put into words how she feels connected to her “home country” and why she feels an attachment to China. During much of her first interview, Olivia laughed nervously and was concerned that she did not know enough about China’s history under Mao to adequately answer the interview questions. When asked if she was interested to learn more, she stated:

I wanna learn more about my country, ‘cause I don’t really know much about it, and it’s embarrassing that I’m Chinese and, they ask me about all this Chinese history, and I don’t know anything about it, and it would be embarrassing, so I really wanna learn.

While Lin and Calvin both described the emotional connection they felt to the Cultural Revolution, due in part to their families’ experiences and in part to the stories they had heard about those experiences, Olivia instead discusses her feelings about not knowing about this event. Her embarrassment about not knowing as much as she thinks she should about Chinese history shows that she also sees a connection between being Chinese and knowing Chinese history. Through the words of all four students, it is clear that they feel connections to Chinese history through their families’ experiences and by virtue of being Chinese.

### **“I am Confused About What to Feel”**

For several of the students, the information they learned about China, in particular about the Tiananmen Square protest but also about Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, led to a certain level of confusion about whether to view China as “good” or “bad.” As previously stated, the students felt strong connections to China and their Chinese heritage. Therefore, seeing images like those in *The Tank Man* documentary or learning about students who were not allowed to attend school during the Cultural Revolution made them question whether they should be proud of their Chinese heritage.

Calvin was disturbed and affected by the images he saw in *The Tank Man* documentary. This was particularly evident in the essay he wrote for his “Democracy Wall” project at the end of the week. Each student was asked to write about what they had learned about China under communist rule and to voice their opinions about Chinese history as the formative assessment for the unit on Modern China. Calvin, an aspiring artist who often doodled during class, drew a well-proportioned, detailed picture of the young man facing the tank at the top of his paper, and focused much of his reflection on what he had learned from the video. Calvin, who sometimes seemed unengaged in class activities and was more interested in joking with his neighbors, wrote an eloquent essay that demonstrated how he has begun to grapple with what it means to be a Chinese boy growing up in the U.S.:

The struggle between peace-loving, democracy-needing citizens against greedy, heartless Communist politicians & upper class means much more to me, personally than before. The things learned from my family, combined with the

events seen on the Smartboard projector, have left me with a confused sense of patriotism, with pity and affection for my ancestral home, and natural-born patriotism instilled in me from kindergarten. In conclusion, [I] felt nearly nothing in the beginning, and now I know I feel something, but the name of the emotion eludes me. To put it in simpler terms, I am confused about what to feel.

Here, Calvin inadvertently shows that the inclusion of heritage histories in the classroom can profoundly impact students who may have connections to those histories. While we cannot know how this unit will impact Calvin and his sense of self in the future, it is possible that this week in Mr. Larson's classroom will have a profound impact on the way Calvin views himself and his connection to his "ancestral home" in the future. Again, Calvin's mature approach to the multiple perspectives he has heard from his parents and his teacher have allowed for Calvin to engage in a much more complex relationship with China's past.

Lin also expressed some confusion in her second interview. When asked if her thinking about Chinese history had changed over the course of unit on Modern China, Lin answered:

Well, the way it was taught in class last week I was kind of embarrassed about [Chinese history], because the massacres and the Cultural Revolution are like the lowest point in Chinese history I've learned about. And I don't know, it made me feel embarrassed...to be Chinese.

Here, Lin seems to echo Calvin's essay, as she tries to reconcile learning about the "lowest points" in Chinese history with her pride in her Chinese heritage. For some of

the students, learning about different views of China impacted their understanding of what it means to be Chinese today. The meaning they ascribe to China's past is directly related to their identifications as Chinese or Chinese American. They all ascribe great importance to their Chinese heritage and exhibit, in one way or another, pride in being Chinese. This pride was brought into question for some of them during the unit on Modern China, and after learning about China in school, they are forced to contend with a national or ancestral past that is not entirely positive.

### **China Today**

Not surprisingly, several of the students discussed their impressions of today's China. They spoke primarily about China's lack of democracy and about China's economic prowess. Particularly for those students who felt strong ties to China, it was important for them to reiterate that China today is not like China under Mao or around the time of the Tiananmen Square uprising. Students often sought to reassure me – and possibly themselves – that China has changed greatly since the events studied in Mr. Larson's classroom had occurred, perhaps in an attempt to rationalize (to themselves) their pride in their Chinese heritage.

Joseph in particular discussed the differences between the China that was portrayed in his history class and the China he knows today. In his second interview, he made several comments about the differences he had noticed: "And China right now isn't even that communist anyway, 'cause the system's working right now has a good economy, it's not like the government's taking too much control of it." A few minutes later, he reiterated his point: "Those events are really different from what China is right

now.” Later in his interview, during a discussion about the lessons that could be learned from the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square uprising, Joseph reemphasized how important it was to him that people realize that China has changed:

The Cultural Revolution is a mistake, I would say, and the massacre. But, I wouldn't make it seem all too bad, because it would [make] everybody think that Mao is – the government's evil and Mao is massacring everybody, and that is not really what China is today, so...[it would] give them the wrong idea, so it's just an event that happened, and there's lessons to be learned.

Joseph sought to show that, despite China's past faults, it is a good, prosperous, safe country. Joseph's concern with pointing out the differences between historical and modern-day China reflect his deep connection to his Chinese heritage and to his fondness for the country where he was born and lived until he was ten. While Calvin and Lin were confused or embarrassed about how to feel about their heritage in light of what they had recently heard and seen about China's history, Joseph responded by emphasizing the positive aspects of modern-day China.

Several of the other students also discussed the China they know, though in a somewhat different manner. Instead of focusing on the positive changes they had seen, they discussed their frustration with the censorship and lack of democracy that persists in China. Olivia and Naomi, both of whom had spent their childhoods in China, expressed their desire for China to become more open and democratic. In her second interview, Olivia provided a nuanced understanding of the impact of the Tiananmen Square uprising on the democratic process in China:

I think when people, like those people who fought at the Beijing thing, they forgot why they were fighting for democracy, because they weren't allowed to talk about it, so as generations go on, people just forget about it, and they accept the way they are, so it's like they accepted Communism or something like that, so no one's complaining about it any more, and that's sad.

Olivia continued with this line of thought a few minutes later:

And the tanks, the Tank Man and stuff, everyone got really scared and I don't think they want that to happen again, so no one is speaking up, so, I don't think there will be democracy. The country might be more modernized every day, and stronger every day, but there still won't be democracy.

I asked Olivia if she thought democracy was important. She said that it was important, and explained her reasoning: "Yeah, because people should express their own feelings and stuff, and have their own human rights, they shouldn't be told what to do, because it's their own country and they live in it. They should have their own opinions about something." Here, Olivia describes a chilling effect that the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square uprising may have had on subsequent democracy movements. Unlike Joseph, she does not view China's economic advances as outweighing the continued censorship of the communist regime.

### **"I Probably Wouldn't Be Here Today"**

Several of the students talked about the Cultural Revolution having a large impact on their lives, and being the reason why they are here in the U.S. When asked to explain this, the students had different reasons. Naomi, whose grandfather was forced to leave

his job as a professor during the Cultural Revolution, said in her first interview: “If the Cultural Revolution wasn’t started, maybe I won’t be in the U.S. Maybe I would just live in China, ‘cause I will have a lot of money (laughs).” For Naomi’s family, the Cultural Revolution brought suffering to her family and perhaps forced them to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Lin also felt that the Cultural Revolution impacted her and her family, as she explained in her first interview:

I think it’s kind of why I’m here, because without the Cultural Revolution, my parents wouldn’t have met, and they wouldn’t have made this choice to come out of China and into the United States, so I probably wouldn’t be here today...The Cultural Revolution.

I asked Lin to explain how she thought the Cultural Revolution influenced her parents’ choice to emigrate to the United States. She replied:

The Cultural Revolution closed China, and that’s why my parents really wanted to get out of China, they wanted to experience democracy, and – I think that’s kinda why my mom chose the major she did, because she wanted a future that wasn’t in China, and import and export gave her the opportunity to get out of there, so I think it really impacted them.

Lin’s understanding of the Cultural Revolution’s impact on her family is somewhat dissimilar to Naomi’s family. While both Lin’s family and Naomi’s family experienced hardships during the Cultural Revolution, only Naomi sees those specific hardships as leading to her family’s emigration to the U.S. Lin instead sees the broader impact on



society, and lack of freedom under the communist government, as primarily impacting her family's choices.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of family conversations about heritage histories cannot be overstated. This is seen in the stark contrast of the narratives of Olivia and Naomi. Both girls were born in China and moved to the U.S. at the age of nine (Olivia) or ten (Naomi). Yet, the girls had different understandings of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong, and present-day China. This is due, in part, to the different ways their families talked with them about history and politics. Naomi's family talked openly and often about history and the current political situation in China, while Olivia's family did not engage in similar conversations. Therefore, Naomi entered Mr. Larson's class with an understanding of the Cultural Revolution and the effects this event had had on her family, and with a fairly sophisticated understanding of the nature of political or historical talk in China. This understanding allowed Naomi to make sense of and accommodate what she learned in class with her prior knowledge. Olivia, meanwhile, was searching for information prior to learning about the Cultural Revolution in Mr. Larson's class. While she did learn more about the reign of Mao Zedong, she was still left with questions about the past and was uncertain how to fit together the disparate bits and pieces she had gathered.

For the Chinese students, learning about the complexities of Chinese history both helped them feel more connected to their Chinese heritage and complicated that connection. For students like Calvin and Joseph, making sense of their connection to a

country whose leaders had mistreated its citizens was difficult. While Calvin struggled to retain his pride in his ancestral home, Joseph struggled to maintain his vision of a modern and open China. For these students and their peers, the work of developing a complex, sophisticated understanding of China now and in the past was just beginning. As evidenced in the students' choice of words – often referring to Mao as either “good” or “bad” with little room in between – they were attempting to navigate these two disparate ideas of China. One way in which they performed this work was by allowing for different perspectives about China's past – sometimes characterized as the U.S. perspective and Chinese perspective. They were perhaps starting to develop more complex understandings of both China's history and their connection to that history.

## **Holocaust Unit: Introduction**

Teaching about the Holocaust, ranging from Adolph Hitler's rise to power in 1933 to the end of WWII in 1945, is included in both national history standards<sup>18</sup> and Illinois state social science content standards.<sup>19</sup> At Washington High School, in suburban Chicago, this history is included in a 9<sup>th</sup> grade Humanities course. The place of the Holocaust in the U.S. curriculum has changed over the past 30 years. Holocaust education began as a grassroots movement in classrooms across the country, and the first Holocaust educators were often met with resistance when they announced their curricular plans (Fallace, 2008). That has changed, however, and the Holocaust is now mandated in many states across the country in either the social studies or English standards, and sometimes in both. By the time most students graduate from high school, there is a good chance that they have been taught a lesson or unit on the Holocaust at some point during their schooling.

The Holocaust is taught in myriad ways in U.S schools. Consistently, teachers focus on victims being primarily Jews, the power and charisma of Adolph Hitler, and the idea that learning about prejudice and dehumanization through a study of the Holocaust will sensitize students to these societal ills and will propel students to act against them in the future (Fallace, 2008; Schweber, 2004). Within these parameters, however, there is much variation. The Holocaust is most often taught in literature, U.S. history, and world history classes. In world history classes, teachers and textbooks typically chronicle German history from the end of WWI, through the turmoil of the Weimar Republic, the

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<sup>18</sup> <http://nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/>

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.isbe.net/ils/social\\_science/mandates\\_2.htm#holocaust](http://www.isbe.net/ils/social_science/mandates_2.htm#holocaust)

rise of the Nazi party and Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in 1933, prior to describing the acceleration of anti-Jewish policies and, ultimately, the use of violence. They conclude by examining the concentration camp system and the Final Solution. In addition to textbook readings, teachers often use film and readings from memoirs or diaries.

### **Review of Literature: Holocaust Curriculum**

Empirical research currently available regarding Holocaust education reveals that despite the prevalence of recommendations and guidelines (e.g., Davies, 2000; Glanz, 1999; Lindquist, 2007; Schweber & Findling, 2007; Totten & Feinberg, 2001), little has been done to examine why and how Holocaust education is happening in classrooms. As leading Holocaust education researcher Simone Schweber (2006a) noted, "While hundreds of articles and an increasingly large number of books advocate Holocaust education, only very few of these base recommendations for practice on empirical research" (p. 51). Unfortunately, not much has changed in the interceding years. Schweber herself offers perhaps the best known empirical studies in this area (Schweber, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Schweber & Irwin, 2003), two of which are of particular note here. First, her excellent ethnographic study of four high school teachers' approaches to teaching this complex subject (2004) shows the vastly different paths teachers can take when teaching the Holocaust, as well as both the desired and unexpected impacts learning about this topic had on their students. Second, Schweber's (2008) analysis of Jewish students learning about the Holocaust in a Jewish parochial school demonstrates how the various messages sent by teachers are interpreted by students. Schweber's work often

focuses on the disconnect between teachers' desire to develop a sense of morality and compassion in their students via a Holocaust unit and the actual impact of the unit on the students' historical understanding. Her studies have begun to show that, despite the acceptance and approval of this topic within the general K-12 curricula, we have much to learn about how students understand and interpret the Holocaust.

A report commissioned by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum reveals a bit more about the status of Holocaust education in the United States more broadly (Donnelly, 2006). Teachers at the secondary level in 48 states and the District of Columbia (n = 219) responded to a survey regarding their involvement in Holocaust education. The report sheds light on the ways in which Holocaust educators approach the teaching of this subject. It states that 88% of teachers approach the Holocaust from a Human Rights perspective (p. 52). Although the author does not define the Human Rights perspective, it is likely that this means that the majority of the Holocaust educators in this study view the Holocaust as an historical event with universal lessons about the importance of upholding the rights of all human beings, rather than as a unique campaign of anti-Semitism and annihilation against the Jews. Based on the plethora of recommendations for teaching this subject, it is likely that the Human Rights perspective allows teachers to use the Holocaust as a way to teach their students about universal themes such as prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.

Finally, Spector (2007) and Spector and Jones (2007) have provided two empirical studies which investigate the ways in which students make meaning of two of the most popular and widely read Holocaust texts: Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Anne Frank's

*Diary of a Young Girl*. In much the same way that Schweber's study (2004) demonstrates that despite teachers' expectations, the lessons of the Holocaust are not self-evident, Spector and Spector and Jones show that studying these texts does not always lead students to the understanding of the Holocaust that their teachers expect or desire.

### **Setting, Curriculum, and Participants**

#### **Washington High School and Ms. Harris**

Washington High School is located in Maple Lake, a first-ring suburb of Chicago. Washington sits on a busy suburban street not far from Maple Lake's downtown shopping and entertainment area. The main school building is almost one hundred years old, and has been added onto several times in the interceding years, making the labyrinthine hallways a challenge for newcomers to navigate. The halls are lined with lockers, posters advertising upcoming dances, athletic events, and club meetings, and are usually full of students chatting and listening to music before and after school. A very large public high school, Washington is the only school in its district.

On the 2010 U.S. census, 66% of Maple Lake's 74,486<sup>20</sup> residents identified as White, 18% as Black/African American, 9% as Asian, and 9% as Hispanic/Latino. Washington High School's student enrollment during the 2010-2011<sup>21</sup> school year was slightly more diverse than the city as a whole; 42% of the 3,060 students identified as White, 33% as Black, 17% as Hispanic, and 4% as Asian. As religion is not a category recorded by the U.S. census, Washington High School, or the state of Illinois, it is difficult to estimate how many students at Washington identify as Jewish. However, the

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<sup>20</sup> <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://webprod.isbe.net/ereportcard/publicsite/getsearchcriteria.aspx>

North American Jewish Data Bank<sup>22</sup> gives an overview of the Jewish population of Chicago. In 2010, Chicago was home to the third-largest Jewish community in the United States with 291,800 people identifying as Jewish in and around the city. Of these 291,800 self-identified Jews, 22% lived in the Near North Suburbs, which includes Maple Lake. This is the second-highest concentration of Jews in Chicago, with 24% living in the northern part of the city itself. In other words, almost half of Chicago's Jews live quite close to Washington High School, and it is therefore likely that a small, but significant, number of Washington students identify as Jewish as well.

There are other contextual clues that indicate Washington is located in a neighborhood with a fairly large and active Jewish community. Driving down the main thoroughfare which links the interstate highway with Maple Lake, I passed several synagogues, delis and restaurants touting kosher fare, and shops specializing in Judaica. One Saturday morning as I drove to meet a student for an interview, I passed several families walking to and from synagogue, indicating their observance of the Sabbath. Finally, as she had during the previous year, Ms. Harris said she expected to have several Jewish students during the 2010-2011 school year.

Ms. Harris is a White woman in her late twenties with a polished, professional demeanor and genuine relationships with her students. Many of her first period students could be found hanging out in the hall outside her classroom before school, and she often came out to chat with them a few minutes before the bell rang before shepherding them into the room. Ms. Harris is a dedicated, conscientious teacher who uses a variety of pedagogical approaches in her teaching. During the time I spent in her class (nine days),

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<sup>22</sup> [http://www.jewishdatabank.org/Reports/Jewish\\_Population\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_2011.pdf](http://www.jewishdatabank.org/Reports/Jewish_Population_in_the_United_States_2011.pdf)

she masterfully led interactive lectures, facilitated a WebQuest on Jewish Partisans, helped the English teacher lead a read-aloud of *Night*, and purposefully incorporated short clips from the movie *Defiance*. She used short, formative assessments to gauge her students' understanding and level of thinking. She excelled at guiding students to think deeply about why historical events unfolded as they did, and intentionally incorporated complex historical topics into her unit on the Holocaust. She was aware that most of her students had previously studied this topic in their 8<sup>th</sup> grade literature classes, and decided to include a mini-unit on the Jewish Partisans as a way of hopefully exposing students to a new aspect of this story.

Ms. Harris does not identify as Jewish herself, though she does have Jewish relatives. She described the influence these family connections had on her understanding of the event as an adult:

My grandfather's Jewish. My grandmother's Catholic, so my mom and her siblings were raised Catholic, but my stepfather's Jewish and I go to Passover and I participate in the Seder, and, so – I know there's a lot of debate over whether you can be just religiously Jewish or if there's this ethnic, cultural part to it, so I definitely identify a certain aspect of my heritage. And I'm really interested in it, and – it's interesting to me to think if my great-grandfather hadn't come when he came, there's a strong possibility I wouldn't be here. So I think that's something that, as an adult I started to think about, my goodness, if my grandfather hadn't left...



Ms. Harris made an explicit connection between her great-grandfather's emigration to the United States and the Holocaust a moment later: "If he hadn't left then, either a pogrom or the Holocaust might have caught up with my family." Ms. Harris hoped that all her students would learn to be aware of global oppression and genocide, and to stand up to prejudice and discrimination in their own lives. She was also conscious of the Jewish students in her classroom:

I think it's also important to bring students' own narratives and histories into the classroom and in Maple Lake, we definitely have a large group of students who identify as Jewish, and I think it's important to bring those different histories and perspectives into the classroom.

However, she also saw how students from other backgrounds may make connections of their own with this event. When asked if she felt that it was important for people who are not Jewish to know about the Holocaust, she said:

Yes...I think it's important for people to be able to empathize with others, and I think it's important for students to be able to see parallels and similarities amongst students in here who have roots with African slavery, or are discriminated against 'cause of the color of their skin, I think it's important to be able to see the parallels and similarities, and be able to empathize with one another. It's also important to take an actual active stance against anti-Semitism or discrimination, racism in the classroom, 'cause kids are impressionable at this age, and I think it's [important] to positively impress upon them I guess what I would consider ethical morals in that way.

Clearly, Ms. Harris felt that learning about the Holocaust was an important part of her students' education and that it may help them develop a positive set of guiding morals.

Washington High School operates on a traditional semester schedule, with nine 42-minute periods during each school day. Freshman Humanities is a year-long course taught by one history and one English teacher. Students attend separate English and history classes, but the content of the classes is linked together and the teachers plan their units together. Thus, for the Holocaust unit, the students read Wiesel's *Night* in their English class while studying the Holocaust in their history class. The students who attend Ms. Harris' first period history class attend English class during second period, and vice versa. Therefore, Ms. Harris and Ms. Marshall, the English teacher with whom she was partnered, were able to bring their first and second period students together in one room for three consecutive days in order to read *Night*. I spent nine days total in Ms. Harris' classroom observing her first period class, including the three reading days (during which I stayed through second period).

Ms. Harris' classroom was located on the third floor of the school, in a far corner accessible via a series of small, angular hallways. Her room was comfortable and spacious, with a blackboard located on the wall next to the door and a wall of windows opposite the board. The other two walls were adorned with posters, flags, pictures, and student work. An LCD project sat on a stand in the middle of the room next to a table full of handouts and books. Ms. Harris' desk was in the far corner and allowed her to sit at her computer and see the rest of the room. The desks were arranged in rows of five and six in a squared-off horseshoe that allowed students to see the board or screen, as

well as each other. Ms. Harris walked among student desks, tapping a student on the shoulder who may not have been fully engaged in the lesson and monitoring student work. I sat in a desk in the corner of the room by the large wall of windows. The five focal students sat around the room and I was able to see their faces and gauge their reactions to the conversations and work of the classroom.

### **Holocaust Unit**

Ms. Harris' unit on the Holocaust followed a study of World War II. Ms. Harris introduced the topic on the same day that the class discussed the end of WWII and the dropping of the atomic bomb. She began not by asking students what the Holocaust was, but by asking what events led to the Holocaust. Some of the students volunteered that Jewish children were forbidden from attending school and that Jewish people were made to wear yellow stars on their clothes, and they also mentioned ghettos and concentration camps. Ms. Harris briefly defined these two terms, and then concluded the day by asking students "how it got from Jewish children not being allowed to go to school to Jews being on a train on their way to a concentration camp?" She asked students what could have happened to prevent this evolution; essentially asking what responsibilities people might have had to prevent the Holocaust from happening.

Following this short introduction, the students in Ms. Harris' first period history class spent three days – a total of six class periods, as each of the reading days was conducted as a block class with the students who had English first period – reading *Night* aloud with their classmates. On these days, the students who had English first period joined their peers in Ms. Harris' room, which led to a large number of students sitting on

the floor surrounded by backpacks, books, notebooks, sweatshirts – the usual detritus of high school. Despite this setting, the students were respectful of each other as they read aloud, sometimes stumbled over new vocabulary, and were engaged and active participants in the discussions led by Ms. Marshall, Ms. Marshall’s student teacher Mr. Noonan, and Ms. Harris. Mr. Noonan served as lead teacher during the reading days, and scaffolded the students’ reading through the use of student-generated vocabulary lists and reading logs. Many of the discussion questions came directly from the students. The questions ranged from asking what it means to get into ranks (as described during a passage about roll call in the book) to asking about the significance of a veteran prisoner at Auschwitz advising Wiesel to lie about his age upon his arrival at the camp. The teachers alternated answering the questions themselves, and allowing students with deep prior knowledge to answer their peers’ questions. The teachers sometimes refocused questions to relate to the essential question for the Holocaust unit: “What are human beings capable of?”

After the three days spent reading *Night*, the students returned to their regular schedule and attended first and second periods separately. Ms. Harris began a series of lessons on the Jewish partisans. She began by asking students what they thought of when they thought of the Holocaust, and after hearing their answers, she asked if they usually thought of Jews as being victims. Most students raised their hands in response to this question, indicating that they did think of Jews as victims. Ms. Harris then introduced the term Jewish partisans and began playing the introductory video from the Jewish Partisans

Education Foundation (JPEF) website<sup>23</sup>. Accompanying this viewing was a study guide also provided by JPEF. The next day, the students went to the computer lab to do individual WebQuests using the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) website and a graphic organizer to examine different ways in which Jews resisted during the Holocaust. The students were to examine the actions of the Jewish partisans, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and killing center revolts.

The following day began with a formative assessment that was structured around a gallery walk activity, in which Ms. Harris put five large pieces of butcher paper around the room, each with one guiding question written at the top. Students moved to each poster in small groups, and wrote their opinions and thoughts about the five topics: Jewish Partisans, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the killing center revolts, what they think human beings are capable of, and whether hearing the stories of Jewish partisans and other Jewish resistance efforts changed their view of Jews during the Holocaust. Ms. Harris led a whole class debrief of this activity, and was gratified that many of the students seemed to have gained a new perspective about the experience of Jews during the Holocaust. She ended the day by handing out a packet about the Bielski brothers, who are perhaps the best-known Jewish partisan leaders, and asking students to complete the reading and attached questions prior to the class viewing clips from the Bielski biopic *Defiance* the following day. The readings on the Bielski brothers and the clips from *Defiance* are also resources from JPEF. The next day's lesson involved viewing the clips and discussing some of the thornier issues involved in partisan activities – namely, scenes

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<sup>23</sup> [www.jewishpartisans.org](http://www.jewishpartisans.org)

from the movie in which Tuvia Bielski shot the local peasant who had turned his family in to the Nazis and in which the partisans steal food. Ms. Harris led discussions about these scenes and asked students to contemplate the gray areas of history. Ms. Harris ended the Holocaust unit the following day by finishing the discussion about *Defiance* and giving an interactive lecture about liberation of the concentration camps, the Nuremberg Trials, her own experiences visiting Dachau, and the Demjanjuk trial, as it was in the news at the time. She gave a brief overview of the formation of the United Nations and the development of documents like the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and the U.N. Convention on Genocide before giving a preview of the Rwandan genocide. The students would be watching *Hotel Rwanda* the following week.

### **Student Profiles**

While five of Ms. Harris' students chose to participate in this study, I only highlight four of them in this chapter. The fifth student, Michelle, was an anomaly. Though she volunteered to participate in the study after learning about the requirements to do so (namely, that she identify as Jewish), during her first interview Michelle told me that she did not identify as Jewish but instead as Agnostic. She did share that her maternal grandfather was Jewish, which seemed to be her way of legitimating her participation in the study. She also shared that her maternal great-grandfather, a Christian, was involved in rescue and resistance efforts in the Netherlands during the Holocaust. While Michelle is a fascinating case unto herself in regards to the question of how students relate to the past, her story and connections were far enough removed from her peers' experiences that I decided not to include her in this analysis.

**Aaron.** Aaron is a serious, studious young man who turned fifteen the day before our first interview. Speaking through a mouthful of braces, Aaron answered the interview questions quickly and thoughtfully. Both of Aaron's parents are Jewish and Judaism is central to his family's life. Aaron attended a local Jewish parochial school through 8th grade, and was therefore often consulted during the reading of *Night* about the correct pronunciation of Hebrew words, a task he seemed to approach with a combination of pride, irritation, and embarrassment. He had extensively studied the Holocaust in school prior to studying it in Ms. Harris' room, and therefore very little of material was new to him. He sometimes struggled to hide his frustration with his peers' lack of knowledge about the Holocaust.

**Deborah.** Deborah is a shy, soft-spoken young woman who kept to herself in her history classroom. She seldom contributed in class discussions, yet her interviews demonstrated her sharp thinking, sense of humor, and willingness to grapple with complex moral and ethical issues. Deborah's father is Jewish and her mother is Christian. However, Deborah identifies as Jewish, attends Hebrew school at her synagogue, and was bat mitzvahed.

**Ryan.** Ryan is a slight, energetic boy who said that he signed up to participate in this study in part because he "likes volunteering." Like Aaron, he attended a private school through 8th grade. His school, however, was a progressive, secular institution. While Ryan's mother is Jewish and his father is not, Ryan identifies as Jewish and discussed how his mother felt that celebrating Jewish holidays is an important part of

their family's life. Ryan had previously studied the Holocaust, and was eager to learn more about it in Ms. Harris' class.

**Sophia.** Sophia is a thoughtful, talkative, enthusiastic young woman. She seemed to really enjoy the interviews and often interjected new thoughts or stories that she wanted to share. In class, she was slightly more reserved, yet still spoke up to share her opinions or ask questions. Like Deborah and Ryan, Sophia identifies as Jewish though she has one parent (her father) who is not Jewish. Sophia's family is involved in Jewish cultural and religious activities, and Sophia had a great deal of background knowledge about the Holocaust prior to learning about it in Ms. Harris' class.

### **Student Narratives**

The Jewish students learned about the Holocaust from multiple sources prior to studying this event in Ms. Harris' class. Each of them had learned about it from their parents in some way, read books, seen movies, and learned about it in school. Additionally, they had all visited the local Holocaust museum, either with their families or on class trips. As Deborah said in her first interview, "I don't really remember ever not knowing about it." The students had all read memoirs in their eighth grade literature classes, though not all the same book. Ryan and Sophia read *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl*, Deborah read Alicia Appleman-Jurman's *Alicia: My Story*, and Aaron read *Night*. In addition, several of the students had read Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, as well as other books they had found in their houses but whose names they could not recall. Therefore, the Jewish students had a fairly large amount of prior knowledge



about the Holocaust, gleaned from a variety of sources, all of which seemed to shape fairly similar narratives for the four students profiled in this study.

### **“It’s a Horrible Event”**

While all four of the Jewish students were able to give an account of the Holocaust in their first interviews, their accounts ranged from short summaries to lengthy, detailed narratives. The narratives all included mentions of Adolf Hitler and focused on the planned, methodical murder of European Jewry. The students’ approaches to this history in their first interviews revealed much about their understanding of the Holocaust. Ryan, who described himself as “half Jewish” during his first interview, gave the shortest and least detailed summary: “It’s a horrible event when the Germans took over and killed almost all the Jewish population. [Hitler] wanted everyone to be exactly the same, like, the Aryan race.” Later in his first interview, when asked if he could remember what he knew about the Holocaust prior to learning about it as an 8th grader (the year prior to his participation in the present study), Ryan elaborated on this statement: “I knew that it was killing all the Jews, and I knew Hitler. And, I knew they were being sent places to kill them, but I didn’t know exactly what they were doing.” He reported that he learned more about “what really happened at the camps” in 8th grade. Even with this comment, Ryan’s account is still fairly broad and vague. Still, despite his brevity, Ryan’s remarks capture the narratives told in greater detail by his classmates.

Similar to Ryan, Deborah gave a brief and fairly broad statement when asked during her first interview to talk about the important events and people that pertain to the

Holocaust: “Hitler set up this program for exterminating Jews.” However, statements she made later in the same interview indicate that she may have a deeper understanding of the event. In response to a question about what Deborah thought her teacher might cover in the upcoming Holocaust unit, Deborah said

She’ll probably just cover the main points and mention some of the different concentration camps and the different laws that were put into action. We might watch a video about it, I don’t know. I guess I hope she goes into enough detail to make sure we understand it correctly.

Deborah elaborated on this final statement a few moments later, perhaps indicating that she had specific ideas about how she thought the Holocaust should be understood: “It wasn’t just ‘oh, um, we’re going to kill all the Jews now,’ it was planned.” In these two comments, Deborah presumably refers to the Nuremberg Laws, which were implemented in the 1930s in Germany as a way of legally and non-violently removing Jews from society, and she also refers to the importance of focusing on the planning done by the Nazis prior to the Final Solution. These comments also demonstrate that Deborah had a fairly significant amount of prior knowledge before studying the event in Ms. Harris’ class, to the extent that she could articulate how she thought a unit on the Holocaust should be taught.

Aaron gave a more detailed statement in his original telling of the Holocaust, which is unsurprising given his extensive education on the topic at his Jewish parochial school. When considering this background, his words may also be considered to offer a somewhat broad overview of the Holocaust:

... the Holocaust was the organized killing or murder, actually, of 11 million people, 6 million which were of Jewish descent, and of the others, it was mainly Gypsies, homosexuals, or disabled people. And it was perpetrated by Nazi Germany during World War II. The most important people, probably – not affected, but causing it – were Hitler, Himmler. And people affected were, all the Jewish people in Europe, almost. A lot of Gypsies, a lot of people that were under Hitler’s control. The most important events were the initial events leading up to the major massive murder, which were the Nuremberg Laws and Kristallnacht, and all the pogroms that – that was mainly Russian – but all the raids on Jewish settlements that had been going on for a very long time. And then, the actual – starting with the actual stuff –starting with the actual murder – the Final Solution, the Nazi experiments, and the shipment of Jews to concentration camps, the SS and Gestapo were the Nazi groups that carried it out.

Importantly, Aaron demonstrates that he sees the Holocaust on a continuum of anti-Semitic actions that occurred in Europe with his mention of pogroms in Russia and other anti-Jewish actions that had been going on “for a long time.” Adam may have been referring here to the ghettoization, persecution, and murder of Jews by the Einsatzgruppen after Germany invaded Soviet-held Eastern Europe in 1941. However, I believe that he is referring to the pogroms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which led his own great-grandparents to flee Russia in the 1910s. In this way, he could connect his own families’ experiences with those of Jews during the Holocaust and create a longer narrative centered on pervasive and persistent European anti-

Semitism. Throughout his interviews, Adam focused on the Holocaust as being one event over the long course of Jewish history.

What is particularly interesting about Ryan's and Deborah's remarks is that, in their breadth, they seem to imply that the story of the Holocaust is so well-known that a detailed retelling to a relative stranger (myself) is somewhat redundant. In other words, it is possible that the Jewish students chose not to go into a great deal of detail about this event, though they later indicated that they knew more than they originally contributed, because the story is so well-known that they may not have felt the need – or known how – to elaborate on their initial broad statements. Since the Holocaust has come to occupy a prominent place in American popular culture (Novick, 1999), and because the students could not remember a time when they did not know about the Holocaust, telling a linear, detailed story about the Holocaust may have felt foreign, weird, or wrong. Additionally, our shared heritage background may have led them to feel that I could “fill in the gaps” of the broad outlines they laid out in their interviews. To an extent, this is also true of Aaron's initial statement. While he did go into much greater detail, it is quite possible that the information he gave in his first interview was an overview of a larger body of knowledge.

How much the students know about the Holocaust, when compared to how much they shared in their interviews, is of interest to this study because it suggests that, when students' heritage histories are also part of the mainstream narrative, the students may assume that there is some amount of “basic” knowledge most people have about the event in question. Asking these students to tell the story of the Holocaust may have elicited the

same sentiment that one of Wineburg et al.'s participants voiced when asked where he learned that the Vietnam War did not have a cause: "It's just *common belief* that the Vietnam War didn't have a cause" (Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007, p. 41). The students in the present study may have also felt that a basic understanding of the events of the Holocaust exists in some sort of common, mutually agreed-upon knowledge bank that need not be explicated.

### **Never Again**

In addition to the main narrative of the Holocaust, the four students also discussed the important lessons people should learn from studying this event. Unsurprisingly, they all voiced some version of the "Never Again" trope – that never again should the world allow genocide to take place without attempting to intervene. There are other interpretations of this adage; for example, in the Jewish community, it is sometimes taken to mean that never again should Jews find themselves the victims of such persecution and oppression. In larger U.S. society, it can be taken to mean that never again should people allow such persecution and oppression to happen to others without speaking out against it. The students in this study viewed this lesson more universally, and believed that learning about the Holocaust would lead to less discrimination, persecution, oppression, and genocide for all people.

As Sophia explained during her first interview, "We should learn from the mistakes of the past, and everything – like never let things – something like the Holocaust happen again, and that's why we learn about it. So, to prevent another one." With these words, Sophia gives voice to a popular and pervasive idea – that by learning about past

“mistakes,” we will be prepared to prevent those mistakes from happening again in the future. When pressed to explain how she saw the connection between these two ideas – that learning about the Holocaust could prevent future genocides – Sophia reasoned that “if you know – then like – if anything like that ever started to happen, you could see the signs early on.” Sophia went on to discuss the “signs” that her history class had recently been discussing regarding the Nazi rise to power, including the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations, and that:

The other countries started letting Germany just do things anyway, ‘cause they didn’t wanna get trouble – like, start a war or anything. But, because they let [Germany] do all that stuff, Germany got really powerful, and if they’d seen that was happening, maybe they wouldn’t have done that.

Here, Sophia gives an example of one piece of the Holocaust that may inform future decisions, but she is not able to explain how this might affect the decision-making of state officials in the future. Instead, she discusses what “other countries” (presumably Great Britain, France, and the United States) could have done to prevent the Nazi regime from violating the terms of the Treaty of Versailles which, presumably according to Sophia, would have also had a chilling effect on the progression of Nazi Germany’s anti-Jewish policies and agenda.

Like Sophia, Aaron discussed the importance of learning about the Holocaust in order to prevent future genocides in his first interview. As he put it, “genocide is never right, that’s the most important [lesson to learn]. That killing people just because they’re different is not – definitely not the right thing to do.” Also like Sophia, Aaron seemed to

have some cognitive dissonance when trying to reconcile this lesson with the fact that other genocides and human rights abuses have occurred since the Holocaust. This was particularly apparent in his second interview:

[It is important for people to know about the Holocaust because] the infamous phrase “never again.” [A]lso, just because it’s something to think about and something to remember and never – it shouldn’t happen ever again, and nothing even close to it should ever happen again. It’s really kind of a bad thing, and no genocide should ever really be allowed to perpetrate – really be allowed to happen, and yet at the same time, it’s always the dilemma that there’s some genocide happening somewhere. And there’s nothing that we can really do to stop that fact, because, humans are humans.

Aaron begins this statement by emphasizing the importance of knowing about the Holocaust because it is vital that such an event never be allowed to happen again. However, when he tries to make sense of continued genocide in the face of the “infamous” “never again” dictum, he is unable to come to a rational conclusion. Ultimately, he decides that despite our best efforts, genocide will always exist as part of human nature.

Aaron’s and Sophia’s responses show a potential unintended impact of the widespread message of “never again.” The students are not sure how to make sense of this lesson – a moral they have presumably been told in myriad ways through the books, discussions, and films they have consumed as part of their education about the Holocaust. It is possible that embracing this moral occludes students’ abilities to grapple with the

thornier, complicated grey areas of historical inquiry. The Holocaust is rarely taught as a history with multiple valid viewpoints; it is instead infused with lessons about tolerance, acceptance, and speaking up against prejudice and discrimination. By combining the moral with the message in this way, teachers, filmmakers, authors, and parents may not be allowing students to truly engage with the history in a way that allows students to develop their own ideas about what should or could be learned by studying the Holocaust. The students, as seen in Sophia's and Aaron's struggles to further explain the "never again" lesson, have clearly internalized this message without being allowed or encouraged to figure out what it means or to question its validity in their own lives. Both are aware of genocides and human rights abuses that have been committed since 1945; however, since they have not thought critically about the lessons that they have been told to learn about the Holocaust, they cannot make sense of these further injustices in light of what they have learned about the past. Despite their best intentions, it is possible that these students' parents and teachers have prevented the students from engaging in a truly meaningful study of the Holocaust.

Related to the idea of "never again," the students thought that learning about the Holocaust would teach people about the perils of dictatorships. As Ryan said in his first interview, when asked what people can learn from studying the Holocaust, "[T]otal control doesn't really work out. 'Cause you have everyone else against you. I said most important people, like bad person, would be Hitler." Later in his first interview, Ryan returned to the idea of power:

I think it's like a huge example to everybody. Something to look back on, and be



glad that it's over. To know that we have to do things to prevent this in the future. So I think it's a good generic example for everybody, 'cause all the movies, everyone's want[ing] total power and everything, and this is the closest it's ever come, or maybe – I don't know, but, to something that has a ton of power.

Here, Ryan fleshes out his previous statement and makes some connections between someone having “total power” and the destruction that power can cause. Deborah echoed this sentiment in her second interview. She stated that one of the reasons people should know about the Holocaust is “so...they...kind of understand...what it was like, and, how bad it was...So nothing like it can happen again.” When asked to elaborate on this idea – that knowing about the Holocaust can prevent future genocides – Deborah, stated:

Well, if we know how destructive it was, and how evil it was, we won't, sort of – like if someone else like Hitler comes along and kind of tries to get people to become...prejudiced against others, then, we won't fall into that trap. I guess.

Here, Deborah seems somewhat hesitant as she tries to verbalize this complex and murky connection. She espouses the view that knowing about past atrocities will spur people to empathize with their neighbors, and therefore they will have the knowledge and motivation to prevent persecution and oppression in the future. Still, much like Aaron's attempt to explain the lessons of “never again,” Deborah seems somewhat unsure about exactly how knowledge about the Holocaust will lead people to act against future dictators.

## **Multiple Perspectives about the Jewish Experience During the Holocaust**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Jewish students were not greatly changed by what they learned in school about the Holocaust. For the most part, the information they gleaned from school was similar to stories and knowledge they already knew. While none of the students questioned their original ideas or felt that their understanding of the Holocaust had changed, there were a few moments of dissonance for some of the students. The bulk of the almost two week long unit on the Holocaust involved reading the memoir *Night* and learning about Jewish Partisans. Each of these pieces of curriculum impacted how the focal students understood the ways in which Jewish people responded to their individual experiences during the Holocaust.

Neither Ryan nor Sophia had read *Night* before, so some of the descriptive content about concentration camps revealed new facets of camp life to the students. In particular, the students were confronted with the idea that the Nazis' deliberate attempts to starve and dehumanize Jews and other persecuted persons would result in people abandoning or turning on their family members. For Ryan especially, this was a new and somewhat troubling idea. In his second interview, Ryan talked about how he thought this abandonment might happen:

I think actually seeing when they got [to the concentration camp], they were shocked, 'cause they see actually they could die and everything, they're in a life or death situation. So they – before, they didn't really know what was happening, like "ok, we'll stay together and everything," but then they see, "oh, it's so hard,"

‘cause then you share your rations, everything, but then –it’s easier to just be one  
– everyone for themselves.

As Ryan expressed empathy and understanding for concentration camp inmates faced with the impossible choice between their own survival and that of their family members, he demonstrated that he was beginning to understand that there were many ways in which Jews responded to the Nazis’ program of persecution and dehumanization.

Deborah also discussed the idea of Jews experiencing the Holocaust in multiple ways, which was spurred by her experience in Ms. Harris’ class. Deborah had previously read *Night* on her own, and had “zoomed through it,” as she said in her second interview. Therefore, the more thorough, directed reading with her classmates allowed Deborah to think more deeply about the themes elucidated by Wiesel. In particular, she was struck by Wiesel’s change from being a very pious and devout young man to doubting and questioning his religion and God. Perhaps spurred by these realizations, Deborah chose to re-read *Maus* on her own. She was struck by the differences in the experiences of the Spiegelman and Wiesel families:

I thought it was interesting – that for a long time, [the characters in *Maus* are] sort of going into hiding rather than being in camps. In the first [book]. And that really wasn’t the case in *Night*, ‘cause he just sort of went straight to the concentration camp. Although I think a former maid or something offered to hide them, but they said no, ‘cause they wanted to stay together. So...I thought that was really interesting how the different stories turned out differently. But they ended up in concentration camps the same way.

By reading these two different accounts of Jewish experiences during the Holocaust, Deborah was able to see how the Holocaust affected different people in different ways, yet the ultimate result was often the same. Deborah returned to this idea of multiple perspectives later in her second interview, when she discussed what she had learned about the Jewish partisans in Ms. Harris' class.

In addition to Deborah, Ryan and Sophia also had minimal knowledge of Jewish partisan groups. All three students identify themselves as Jewish though each has a parent whom they identify as Christian, and each found the stories of Jews rescuing other Jews and fighting back against the Nazis interesting and somewhat empowering. Deborah expressed a desire for these stories to be talked about more openly in her second interview:

I thought it was interesting that they don't seem to get as much attention, even though they were resisting the Nazis. It tends, I don't know – a lot of the stuff you read about tends to focus on the concentration camps, rather than people who were fighting back, I guess.

Here, Deborah implies that the mainstream focus on Jews as victims does not allow for stories in which Jews are empowered actors in their own lives. As a Jewish person, she seems to be asking for a more multidimensional portrayal of Jews, and for a new emphasis on stories such as those of the Jewish partisans.

## **Meaning, Connection, and Impact**

All four of the students felt a connection to the Holocaust by virtue of their Jewish identity. However, the nature and strength of those connections varied widely between the students.

### **“I’m Jewish and a lot of Jewish People Died”**

Sophia was the only one of the four students who had a relative who was directly affected by the Holocaust. Sophia’s grandmother and her family were forced to flee Europe when Sophia’s grandmother was a young girl, and they finally landed in the Dominican Republic before gaining entrance to the United States when Sophia’s grandmother was nine years old. When Sophia was asked during her first interview if she felt a connection to the Holocaust, she replied that she did, and went on to describe that connection through both her Jewish identity and her connection to her grandmother: “I do feel a connection to the Holocaust because first of all, I’m Jewish and a lot of Jewish people died, and I have family – like my Nana’s family had to escape from Europe because of the Nazis.” Sophia has a close relationship with her grandmother and was eager to share several of the stories she had heard from her grandmother, about both her grandmother’s experiences and other stories that her grandmother told her about the Holocaust. Sophia clearly saw how the Holocaust impacted her life, as it completely altered the lives of her maternal grandparents and spurred them to seek refuge in the United States. She was also one of the few students who shared anything about her family in her history class. When her teacher asked “What comes to mind when you think of the Holocaust?” Sophia volunteered that she thought of her grandmother’s family

from Hungary and her grandfather's family from Ukraine who were killed. While this comment was not pursued further in class discussion, Sophia's willingness to share her family history with her classmates demonstrates that she is conscious of her family's past and that she very clearly connects that past with the history she is studying in school.

Aaron and Deborah both described a connection to the Holocaust as part of their Jewish identity despite their lack of family connections to the event. In her first interview, Deborah said: "I don't have family members or anything who went through the Holocaust, but I still feel sort of connected to it. As a Jewish person." She elaborated on this connection a bit later during her first interview: "I think it's important to me...I mean...it's...sort of...difficult to think about sometimes, 'cause it's...scary, you know? If I had been born in the 1930's or something, I would have probably experienced that, if I lived in Europe or something." Here, Deborah clearly identifies with this event as a Jew. In his second interview, Aaron explained this quite simply, by saying "I don't really have a familial connection." He extrapolated on this thought a moment later: "But just the fact that I'm Jewish, it's kind of a more personal thing. When they're killing Jews." Here, Aaron also identifies with the victims of the Holocaust through their shared Jewish identity. Both Deborah and Aaron acknowledge that there are likely people (like Sophia) who will connect differently through family members who were affected by the Holocaust, but also emphasize the connection simply by virtue of being Jewish. Importantly, both Deborah and Aaron seem to be trying on the idea of Jewish victimhood with their statements – by explicitly identifying with those who were persecuted and/or

killed through their Jewish identities, they seem to be connecting to this event by putting themselves in the place of those who did experience this event.

Interestingly, Ryan – the student who seemed least affiliated with his Jewish identity – echoed Aaron’s and Deborah’s sentiments and further teased apart the different ways in which students connected to the Holocaust through their Jewish identity. Ryan, like Deborah and Sophia, has one Jewish parent (his mother) and one non-Jewish parent, and described himself as “half-Jewish.” When asked during his first interview if the lessons of the Holocaust were the same for Jews and non-Jews, he talked about the different kinds of connections people might have to this event: “since I’m only half-Jewish, I didn’t feel completely a connection to [the Holocaust], but I still wanna know about it, how if maybe you were all Jewish you would feel a connection, you want other people to know about it.” With these words, Ryan separates himself from the other students in this study by qualifying his connection to the Holocaust. He seems to see both his Jewish identity and his connection to the Holocaust on a spectrum, with those who are “all Jewish” on one end connecting more deeply with this event, and presumably those who are not Jewish and not connecting at all on the other end.

Ryan seems comfortable with his position somewhere in the middle. Yet Deborah, who like Ryan has one Jewish parent (her father) and one non-Jewish parent, and no close relatives who perished or suffered in the Holocaust, feels a deeper connection to this event than Ryan may have expected, given his logic regarding his own connection. The statements of these two students illustrate the complexity of students’

understandings of heritage histories, and demonstrate how each individual student's identity and sense of self can shape their interactions with these histories.

### **“It's Always in the Back of Your Head”**

In a way, the impact and meaning of the Holocaust for the Jewish students is that the event has become somewhat ubiquitous. Ryan tried to explain this towards the end of his second interview:

I don't think it has a direct impact. We don't do something out of the ordinary just because that happened. I mean, you're not always gonna be like “so I've been thinking of the Holocaust.” It's always – I think I said it last time – it's always in the back of your head.

A few minutes later he concluded that it's “hard to explain.” For Ryan and the other participating students, the Holocaust occupies a unique space in their lives. It is not at the forefront of their thoughts and they do not necessarily think about it all the time, or even most of the time. However, it is always part of their thinking, particularly when learning or reading about other genocides, human rights abuses, and wars. In her second interview, when asked how the Holocaust impacted her life, Deborah again returned to the idea that it affects the way she views the world: “I do think about it, you know. It affects the way I think about things, I guess...It gives me a slightly different perspective on...other issues, like way today, and...prejudice and racism...things like that.” Similar to Ryan, Deborah seems to always have the Holocaust “in the back of [her] head” and, in some way, it influences the way she views the world.



Aaron, whose religious, family, and academic lives were all strongly rooted in Judaism, discussed the presence and importance of the Holocaust slightly differently. While both Deborah and Sophia saw their connection to and knowledge about the Holocaust as a bridge to other histories, peoples, and events, Aaron viewed the Holocaust as being very relevant to himself as a Jew. In his first interview, he and I had the following conversation after I asked him what the Holocaust means to him:

*Aaron:* It was an attack on a people because they were weak and because a very messed-up person decided that he wanted to take power, and...Jews were conveniently the minority at the time, and couldn't really defend themselves. So personally, to me, being a Jew and being actually a religious Jew, it's kind of hurtful to know that, because of it, we have still remained weak and still can't really defend ourselves, and are still prone to attack. Which is shown by the current events in Israel and, anti-Semitic events that continue.

*SL:* So... some of the things that were – that kind of stemmed from the Holocaust or that maybe caused the Holocaust are still –

*Aaron:* Are still present, yeah.

Here, Aaron expresses his hurt at the past treatment of Jewish people as well as his emotions about present-day anti-Semitism. While Aaron espoused the same universal lessons as his peers, the Holocaust ultimately seems to have a deep, personal, and specifically Jewish meaning for him. While he does not explicitly address whether the Holocaust is perpetually present in his thinking, as Ryan and Deborah do, he does indicate that he sees anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews on a timeline and it is

therefore likely that he thinks about the Holocaust when issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are discussed.

In his second interview, Aaron further indicated that the Holocaust is very much tied to his identity as a Jewish person, which also lends credence to the idea that Aaron sees the Holocaust as omnipresent. When asked what impact the Holocaust had had on his life, Aaron responded:

It's a difficult question. So personally...I mean, obviously there are always the stories and obviously I'm Jewish, so, it's kind of a disturbing fact to me specifically. Although there are always the benefits, which is kind of a contradictory and scary thing, that there are benefits coming out of this, like the state of Israel. Which is, I've been there, hopefully going back at some point. I guess the modern Jewish life is almost entirely affected by the Holocaust. I live in Maple Lake so the majority of the Jewish population there have a great deal of connection, as that was the city of Holocaust survivors. I live in America, which – the majority of Jews – except for maybe Israel - the majority of Jews now live in, because of the Holocaust. Just, the modern way of Jewish life is kind of – it was kind of – there was the shtetl life – and then that ended because of the Holocaust, and because of communism. But shtetl life then, little Jewish villages, then all those Jews were either killed or immigrated – emigrated – and they came to America...I would've probably been alive regardless because both my families came before the Holocaust, and both my families were Russian. But I still do – I mean, it still greatly affects me. Almost everyone in the world is affected by the

Holocaust, I would say.

By using such broad and sweeping language to discuss the impact the Holocaust has had on his own life, and the life of every modern Jew, Aaron seems to indicate that the Holocaust has shaped his life in a permanent way. Aaron does not explicitly state that the Holocaust is always “at the back of his head;” instead, he gives the event a deeper and more entrenched meaning for himself, his Jewish peers, and all modern Jewry.

### **“The Way I Think About Things”**

Two of the students, Deborah and Sophia, discussed how knowing about the Holocaust impacted how they viewed other genocides or human rights abuses. In her first interview, when asked what impact the Holocaust had had on her life, Deborah shared that “sometimes it has an impact on the way I think about things...” A few minutes later, I asked her how the Holocaust impacts the way she thinks about things: “Current events, I guess. Not genocides necessarily, but wars, or discrimination against certain people.” Later in the interview, she discussed these ideas further:

I know there have been other genocides, like in Africa, and I’d like to know more about those and see how they’re similar and how they’re different. And how governments discriminate against other minorities. Whether they still do that any more and if so, where.

Deborah seems to be trying to figure out here how to use her knowledge of the Holocaust to analyze and understand other world events. What she intends to do with this understanding is unknown, but it is possible that this desire to understand how and why other instances of persecution have occurred is related to her quest to really understand

the connection between knowing about the Holocaust and preventing genocides in the future. Perhaps, by trying to understand the patterns of human rights abuses, she is attempting to decode what is meant by “never again.”

Sophia also talked about how the Holocaust impacted her view of the world. Sophia, whose grandmother fled Europe to escape Nazi persecution, felt that her specific connection to the Holocaust impacted her connection to the rest of the world. She described this connection in her first interview:

It has impacted the way I think about other people – like other groups of people, and people in other countries. ‘Cause, I’ve always wanted to go to another country and do service work, like helping people, and I think [my grandmother’s] stories have probably impacted that.

Like Deborah, it is possible that by connecting the stories she had heard from her grandmother to her desire to help people in (presumably) less fortunate circumstances, Sophia is trying to enact some of the lessons she has learned about the Holocaust. Her desire to reach out to and connect with people who are different from her seems to stem from a desire to live out the lesson of treating people equally. It is perhaps an overly simplistic desire, but at age 14, Sophia is trying to make sense of the large, complex history she has inherited from her grandmother.

In her second interview, Sophia again spoke about her family’s connection to the Holocaust influencing the way she thinks about others around the world. She expressed her belief that not only was she connected to other Jews, in particular the descendents of Holocaust survivors, but that she was also connected to descendents of survivors of other

genocides and human rights abuses: “It’s kinda something that connects people, you know – that are Jew – that have had family that went through that, or anyone else who had family who’s gone through something like that.” She concluded her interview by sharing a story she heard in which this kind of connection seemed to have taken place:

I heard a story about these social workers that went to Rwanda. They were with this group of people, and when they said they were Jewish, they totally embraced them, and had this really strong connection, ‘cause they knew that they’d gone through similar things.

With this statement, Sophia expands the circle of survivors and descendents of survivors to include people who survived genocides other than the Holocaust. Again here, she seems to be attempting to act out the empathy that she believes should people should develop as a result of both knowing about the Holocaust and by being a member of a survivor community.

### **Conclusion**

The Jewish students were thoughtful and willing participants in this study, and ably demonstrated their knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust. They struggled, however, to articulate some of the reasoning behind their opinions. This was particularly evident when students were asked to move past pat, neat answers about the lessons people should learn from the Holocaust. The Holocaust has come to occupy a place of sacredness in both Jewish American culture and in American culture more broadly. It is perhaps for this reason that students were not sure how to really explain why people should know about the Holocaust beyond simple, somewhat clichéd,

rationales. For these students, who could not remember a time when they did not know about the Holocaust and who had been told by multiple trusted sources (parents, teachers, books) that this is an event with important and enduring lessons, questioning the Holocaust was an unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable exercise.

Still, Deborah's and Sophia's thoughts on how their knowledge about and connections to the Holocaust can help them interact more compassionately and empathetically with others is an indication that the students are attempting to embody the lessons they espouse. That they stumble over words and try out answers in an attempt to verbalize and solidify their thoughts indicates that they are still trying to make sense of an event which is often described as "unfathomable" and "unimaginable." Their attempts to make meaning of the Holocaust by connecting their understanding of this event to other similar events is evidence that students are listening to the myriad sources which plead for increased empathy and activism in the face of suffering and oppression, even as they are not exactly sure how to go about this endeavor.

Aaron and Ryan identify as Jewish in different ways, which seems to directly influence how they view the Holocaust. For Ryan, who distances himself from an all-encompassing Jewish identity, the Holocaust is an important yet distant event that holds little deep personal meaning or significance. Aaron discussed his strong ties to his Judaism, and struggled to explain exactly how the Holocaust has impacted and shaped his life. In his thoughtful interview responses, Aaron gave voice to the feeling that the Holocaust has shaped his life in so many ways both large and small that capturing that impact in a sentence or two is a challenge. These students demonstrate the myriad and

diverse ways in which adolescents understand heritage histories, and their differences are all the more informative in light of the omnipresence of the Holocaust. Despite the strong Holocaust narrative that exists in the Jewish community, and in the larger American community, and which was followed by Ms. Harris in the students' history class, these students are still able to chart their own paths of historical understanding.

Ultimately, learning about the Holocaust in school did not radically shift or shape these students' narratives of the Holocaust. This is likely due to both their extensive prior knowledge and to the well-known and established narrative of the event that exists in American society. Yet, these students demonstrate that there are still big, complex, messy areas of history which they are trying to navigate. In particular, this can be seen in their attempts to make sense of the purported lessons of the Holocaust in light of continuing injustice, oppression, and genocide.

## Discussion

In this chapter, I return to the three heritage cases: the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution, and the Holocaust. I analyze both the common themes that emerged across cases, as well as themes that are unique to each of the cases. What becomes clear, when looking across the heritage cases, is that there are some enduring themes and ideas that stem from the students' understandings of heritage histories. These themes illustrate the importance and relevance of both families and schools in the development of students' understandings and impressions of the heritage histories. Importantly, there are also themes which are unique to each case, related to temporal and physical distance, location, and generation. I will first discuss those themes which crossed cases and which provide insight into students' historical understanding on a broader level. I will then examine the themes which are specific to each case and attempt to explicate why these themes appeared and what meanings they might hold for each heritage group.

### Themes Across Cases

**Family stories, fuzziness, and the role of school knowledge.** When looking across all three cases, it becomes clear that the students who have repeatedly heard stories about the heritage events from their families – those students for whom these histories are part of “dinner table conversation,” as Lin said – anchor their understandings of the heritage events in these family stories. No matter what new perspectives or ideas are introduced in school, the students continue to trust their families' accounts of the past. While they are willing to reconstruct their narratives to include what they learn in school, they do not remove their families' experiences from the center of those narratives.



*Family stories.* Across cases, there were a number of students who were able to recount the stories of their families' experiences during the heritage events. In particular, this was true of the Hmong and Chinese students, but also for the one Jewish student whose grandmother had told stories about her experiences fleeing Europe in the 1930s. What is noteworthy about these stories is that they are personal and individual – no two stories are the same. Lin's face lit up as she recounted stories she had heard from her grandmother about having to bury valuables in the yard in order to avoid persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Brandon's face hardened and he looked troubled as he told the story of his father's family foraging for food in the jungles of Laos as they fled to the safety of Thailand, almost as if he was playing a movie of his family's struggles in his mind. Sophia animatedly talked about her grandmother's arrival at Ellis Island, and how the family was diverted for several years to the Dominican Republic. *These students, both before and after learning about the events in school, placed their family's experiences and stories at the center of their own historical understandings. While the students added to and augmented the family stories with information they learned from school, they did not displace their family's experiences as the centerpiece of their narratives.*

For example, Calvin's memories of his grandmother talking about the day Mao died centered his construction of this pivotal event. His grandmother had told him that the people in the village in which she was working were crying and distraught upon hearing the news that Mao had died. However, Calvin was confused by this story when he learned in school that Mao's policies were responsible for the suffering and starvation

of the people in the village. How could they be sad about the death of the man who had caused their pain? Instead of dismissing his grandmother's story and focusing on the material presented by his teacher, Calvin continued to make his grandmother's story the focus of his narrative. He came to the conclusion that the villagers were sad because "[Mao]'s still a human being" and the appropriate response upon learning about the death of a fellow human being is to cry. Calvin centered his meaning-making about Mao's death on the story his grandmother had told him. He did not question his grandmother's story, and he did not allow for the new information to decentralize her words. Instead, he used the new information to create new inferences about the villagers' feelings about this event. For Calvin and the other students who cherished their families' stories, these stories formed the basis of their historical understandings and they worked their new school knowledge into their existing frameworks.

Like Calvin, Brandon put his family's story at the center of his narrative even after learning about the Vietnam War in school. In fact, the information he learned from Ms. Adams' class helped him to better understand his family's past and connect it with his own life. Even the first words he used to talk about the connections he saw between the stories he heard from his family and the information he learned at school – "*family comes first*" – indicate the importance of his family and their experiences. Before Ms. Adams' class, Brandon knew that Hmong people had fought with the United States in the Secret War and that his own father had even played a role as a young boy. However, when Ms. Adams explained that it was President Nixon's decision to withdraw U.S.

troops from Southeast Asia, which led to the recruitment of Hmong soldiers, Brandon was able to fill in the context around his families' stories:

I mean of course, family comes first, and you know – I don't know, it's just – it made – it changed everything – it changed, mostly, everything in Hmong families. It's just not some Hmong families, it changed everybody's family. And the presidents, I think they was – it woulda been a better choice if something else woulda happened instead of, just withdrawing – we were taught that Nixon, President Nixon just, you know, as he got elected, he just stepped out of Vietnam or something like that, and I think he shoulda just continued it or something, to finish it, instead of just making [the Hmong] do it themselves, 'cause, they got involved in the war already, so they might as well finish it, instead of just backing down and leaving everything.

Here, Brandon seems dissatisfied with the U.S. government, precisely because he knows how those administrative, bureaucratic, political decisions painfully and permanently impacted his family. Brandon's words demonstrate how the students' emotional attachments to their families and identification with their families' struggles impacted and influenced their interpretations of the history they learned at school.

*Uncertainty and confusion.* Unlike Calvin and the other students who had heard stories about the heritage events from their families, students like Olivia and Theresa did not feel that they had sufficient information about the events prior to learning about them in school. Several of the Hmong and Chinese students discussed that they knew *of* the events, had a sense of their importance, but did not know enough *about* the events.

Theresa, one of the Hmong students, described this feeling of “fuzziness.” This feeling sometimes then led to feelings of embarrassment and shame, as well as a latent thirst for knowledge that the students were sometimes unwilling or unable to share with their parents. Returning to Pa’s eloquent metaphor, in which she equates her knowledge about the Vietnam War to a half-full bottle hanging over her head, it seems that several of the students felt a certain amount of shame and embarrassment about their limited knowledge of these events.

Pa’s words were echoed by Olivia, who discussed her embarrassment about not knowing a lot about the Cultural Revolution during her first interview: “It’s embarrassing that I’m Chinese and they ask me about all this Chinese history, and I don’t know anything about it, and it would be embarrassing, so I really wanna learn.” *Olivia, Pa, and Theresa seemed to sense an expectation – from society, their peers, members of their heritage communities, teachers, and/or others – that they be knowledgeable about the heritage events.* They felt embarrassed that they were unable to meet these expectations. In their first interviews, all three of these students expressed a desire to learn more, and hoped that studying these events in their history classes would fill in the gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

***The role of school knowledge.*** It is important to highlight the vital roles history teachers can play in helping students connect to and understand “their own” histories. *Through their teachers’ curricular choices, both Pa and Olivia were able to develop deeper and more thorough understandings of “their own” histories, which seemed to both deepen their connections to their heritage identities and allow them a feeling of*

*belonging and solidarity with their ancestors.* It is important to note that, while those students whose families shared stories about the events were more likely to center their historical narratives around those stories, the majority of all students centered their narratives around their identification as a member of their heritage group. It is also important to note that the students who felt that they had sufficient knowledge about the heritage events learned new information in their history classes. However, they processed and incorporated this knowledge into their existing narratives in different ways.

Lin, for example, was able to integrate the information she learned at school – which contradicted what she had learned at home – into her existing narrative template about Chinese history. Lin’s family did not like Mao and felt that he did not act in China’s best interests. However, Mr. Larson’s fairly evenhanded portrayal of Mao allowed Lin to see that “he really did want a better country and it didn’t come out to that, so, I guess it wasn’t – I mean, his intentions at least weren’t so bad.” Lin’s narrative about the Cultural Revolution and Mao did not significantly change after learning more about him in school; instead, the school knowledge added to what she already knew. Learning about Mao’s stated intentions for China helped her develop a more multidimensional view of the leader. This may have increased Lin’s ability to see history as multifaceted and complex, instead of consisting of one simplistic narrative with “good guys and bad guys.” Still, she is able to center the story around what she has learned from her parents.

Isabelle, the Hmong student who did not “really, really care” about the Vietnam War in her first interview, developed a new understanding of and connection to the war after learning about it in Ms. Adams’ class. Ms. Adams’ brief mention of the Nixon administration’s decision to recruit Hmong soldiers to fight in the Secret War in Laos rather than send more U.S. soldiers to fight an increasingly unpopular and unwinnable war had a profound impact on the Hmong students in this study, particularly Isabelle. She did not talk about the Secret War at all in her first interview, and astutely attributed her lack of interest in the war to that fact that her family did not talk about it. Learning about the concrete connection between the Vietnam War and the Secret War – that the United States deliberately recruited, trained, and employed Hmong soldiers – seemed to spark an interest in this history in Isabelle. She saw how the history she was learning in school related to the events her family had lived through. She even commented on this change during her second interview, noting how “funny” it was that she had not thought to mention the Secret War in her first interview, yet it was the focus of her second interview. Isabelle provides a powerful example of a student who is engaged in learning about her heritage history through the official history curriculum, and how what she learned in school can augment her prior knowledge about her family’s life prior to moving to the United States.

The multi-dimensional portrayal of Jews in Ms. Harris’ class showed Ryan and Deborah that some Jews were able to fight back and make their own decisions, which perhaps allowed them to identify with this heritage history in a new and somewhat more empowering way. Learning about the Jewish partisans helped Ryan and Deborah see that

Jews during the Holocaust were not merely passive victims who “went like sheep to slaughter” in the concentration camps. Instead, Ryan and Deborah were offered portraits of Jews who fought against the Nazis as partisans – cunning forest fighters who would steal or kill if necessary, but who also rescued Jews from neighboring ghettos. Deborah, in her quiet and thoughtful way, seemed somewhat troubled that this portrayal of Jews during the Holocaust – as empowered and multifaceted people – receives less attention in the mainstream Holocaust narrative than the portrayal of Jews as powerless pawns of the Nazis. Neither Ms. Harris nor Deborah is challenging the idea that, for the majority of Jews during the Holocaust, resistance may not have led to survival; instead they are calling for a more nuanced and complex imagining of what it means to be a member of a victim group. Deborah continues to center her Holocaust narrative around her connection to the event through her Jewish identity, and this new image of what it may have meant to be a Jew during the Holocaust has slightly altered how she constructs her narrative.

*Multiple perspectives.* Perhaps one of the most important and interesting cross-cases themes is that the three teachers were able to help all three groups of students develop multiple perspectives about the heritage histories. Harkening back to the differences between “heritage” and “history” (Novick, 1999), it is likely that by including heritage histories in public school history classrooms, the histories were legitimated as being part of a larger narrative and “official knowledge,” and therefore contained multiple acceptable viewpoints about each history. These perspectives were different across cases, of course, but the impact of the teachers and their curricular choices are not to be underestimated in the students’ understanding of these histories.

It is interesting to note that, for the students in this study, *historical understanding does not necessitate the distrust of one or another source of information*. Instead, the students show how they are able to think through why their teachers and their families may have different interpretations about what happened. The students generally embrace the idea of multiple perspectives and, when faced with seemingly contradictory accounts, create explanations for why the accounts differ. Calvin provides an excellent example of this when discussing his grandmother's reaction to hearing of Mao's death. It did not make sense to him that people would cry when hearing about the death of a man who had forced them to starve. Instead of simply discounting either the idea that Mao's policies led to starvation in China's countryside or discounting his grandmother's memory, he decides that the villagers were simply crying out of respect for a fallen leader. In this way, he allows for multiple perspectives to work together to create his understanding of the past.

Ryan, Deborah, and Isabelle present a different way in which students pieced together knowledge they learned at school with what they previously knew. For these students, school knowledge did not necessarily contradict what they previously knew. Instead it deepened their understanding of the past and, importantly, provided each student with a vision of the past that strengthened their ability to identify and connect to the heritage event. For Ryan and Deborah, learning about Jewish partisans gave them a picture of Jews during the Holocaust that played against the more prevalent image of a people who went meekly and quietly to their deaths. For Isabelle, Ms. Adams' brief discussion of the chronology which led to the U.S.-Hmong alliance in Southeast Asia and



the Secret War gave Isabelle the missing pieces that enabled her to more clearly and explicitly see how her family and Hmong people in general are connected to the Vietnam War. In the cases of these students, *school knowledge was a powerful tool that enabled the students to create more lasting connections to the past.*

### **Themes Within Cases**

**The Past is Present.** Rosenzweig (2000) notes that “the most powerful meanings of the past come out of the dialogue between the past and the present, out of the ways the past can be used to answer pressing current questions about relationships, identity, mortality, and agency” (p. 280). The students in the present study participated in just this type of meaning-making. All three groups of students discussed the impact the heritage event had had on their lives. They discussed these impacts in different ways, but it was clear that each student felt the presence of the heritage event in his or her life in some way. The students used the heritage events to make sense of the present, to explain their parents’ actions, or to account for their own thinking.

Prior to learning about the Vietnam War in school, the Hmong students knew that the Vietnam War led directly to their parents seeking refuge in the United States. They then related their parents (or, in Pa’s case, her own) move to the United States as refugees with their parents’ struggles with racism and prejudice, their own struggles with being both Hmong and American, and the loss of a homeland they never knew. The Chinese students were more varied in their approaches to understanding Chinese history. Some, like Calvin, were born in the United States and sought to make sense of their pride in their Chinese heritage with their existing knowledge about the positive, productive parts

of Chinese history and their new knowledge about those parts that embody suffering and pain. Finally, the Jewish students sometimes struggled to explain the meaning and importance of the Holocaust, despite their surety that the Holocaust is a meaningful and important part of Jewish, U.S., and world history. They focused on the “never again” trope and several of the students described how they felt that the Holocaust maintained a small but constant presence in their minds as they think about the world in which they live. All three groups of students engaged, as Rosenzweig explained, with making meaning of the past as it relates personally and specifically to their own lives.

*Temporal and physical distance.* Part of this meaning-making is related to the temporal and physical distance the students have from the focal events. The Jewish students seem to be fighting the temporal distance in their effort to reclaim the victim identity. This means that, by trying on the victim identity and making statements like “it could have been me,” they are trying to find an immediate and personal connection to an increasingly distant history. The Chinese and Hmong students, who are temporally closer to the heritage events and some of whom are being raised by people who experienced these events, tended to classify the events as having taken place a long time ago. There are two primary reasons for this dichotomy. First, the Chinese and Hmong students are often told by their parents how different their lives are from their parents’ teenage years. As Lin explained, “they think back and then they go, well in that time, my mom bought a bike, and she had to hide it under the bed, because they weren’t allowed to have luxuries such as bikes and stuff, and, then they just go about how lucky I am to not have to do stuff like that.” By contrasting their children’s relatively comfortable and safe lives in

the United States with their own experiences, the parents of the Hmong and Chinese students help foster a sense of distance between themselves and their children that cannot be bridged by storytelling or shared heritage.

The Jewish students were not being raised by Holocaust survivors, and in fact only one of the Jewish students – Sophia – had grandparents or other close relatives who were survivors. Their experiences growing up in suburban Chicago are not terribly dissimilar to their parents' teenage years. The feeling of closeness the students have to the Holocaust is likely the product of the placement of the Holocaust at the center of the American Jewish narrative. Symbols of this phenomenon were visible in the neighborhoods surrounding Washington High School. As I drove down the busy main thoroughfare linking the suburb of Maple Lake with the interstate highway, I passed several temples with large yard signs emblazoned with the slogans "Never Forget!" and "Never Again!" I was not surprised to see these signs, as they were likely replacements of similar signs that decorated the lawns of the temples in the Jewish neighborhood where I grew up. These signs are ubiquitous and ensure that the Holocaust is never far from the mind of anyone who passes or enters the temple.

In addition to these constant reminders, there is the sentiment, eloquently expressed by Elie Wiesel, that, "Not every victim was a Jew, but every Jew was a victim." Wiesel's statement reminds people of the Nazis' goal to eliminate Jews across the globe. Perhaps unintentionally, he also opened the door for contemporary Jews to identify as victims by virtue of their identification as Jews. This feeling of identification with those who were persecuted in the Holocaust is reflected in Aaron's description of

the impact the Holocaust has on his life: “it affects my history, my heritage, what I’ve been taught since I was rather young about, our persecuted people.” Here, Adam links the experience of being Jewish with the experience of being persecuted. His words show how he cannot separate the two identities; therefore, it is not surprising that he and the other Jewish students felt a closeness to this event.

The Hmong and Chinese students were also more likely to assume that their relatives who had lived through the focal events had a great deal of knowledge of the events, while the students did not consider themselves experts about the events. For example, Naomi said in her first interview: “I just knew a little, and [my parents] knew a lot. My grandparents know even more.” That the Hmong and Chinese students assumed their parents and other family members knew more about the events because they had lived through them seems to contribute to the sense of distance the students feel from the events. Most of them felt a deep sense of connection to the events, but the stark differences between their own childhoods and their parents’ childhoods created distances that cannot be bridged by words. The following sections extrapolate on and explore how the students made sense of the heritage histories in light of their own lives and experiences.

**Hmong students and the Vietnam War.** The Hmong students’ identification as part of a refugee population was specific and unique to their experience. As members of an ethnic group that is unknown to many Americans and sometimes denigrated in their own communities, they feel an acute sense of difference that students in the other two groups did not discuss. This sense of difference, combined with their own experiences or

tales of their parents' experiences with racism, spurred the Hmong students' desire for the story of the Secret War to be known by their peers and taught in their schools. *They were the only students to discuss the importance of people who are not members of their heritage group knowing about the heritage event in order to decrease prejudice.*

The majority of prior research about Hmong students' experiences in U.S. schools has focused primarily on students' identity construction and experiences with teachers, administrators, and other students. For example, Ngo (2006) notes that while many Hmong students are academically successful, they are also still impacted by racism and poverty. She cites her own work in observing that Hmong students "often must struggle with 'the traditional way' of their parents and 'the American way' of U.S. society" (p. 59). Here and elsewhere (Ngo & Lee, 2007), Ngo describes a student population that must navigate differing societal and familial expectations, racism, poverty, and membership in a refugee population living in diaspora<sup>24</sup>. Her research sheds some light on the Hmong students' reactions to learning a little bit more about the connections between the actions of the U.S. government that led to their families seeking refuge in the United States. The Hmong students were often tasked with fulfilling traditional roles at home, such as babysitting younger siblings, which they had to balance with the demands of academic and extra-curricular school work. Additionally, Theresa and Pa discussed the different behavior that the Hmong community expected from Hmong girls and

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<sup>24</sup> Diaspora refers to a people living away from their ancestral homeland. The idea of diaspora is central to this study because the three groups of students are each living in diasporic communities. Diaspora has several connotations and, when capitalized, refers specifically to Jewish people living in different countries around the world. For the purposes of this study, I use the lower-case diaspora to refer to the experiences of all three groups living in the United States. Diaspora traditionally refers to groups of people who have been exiled or forcibly removed from their homelands, which applies directly to the Hmong students and their parents, whose families were forced to flee Laos as a result of Hmong people siding with the United States during the Vietnam War.

Hmong boys. It seems that these students were experiencing some of the struggles Ngo outlined. Therefore, learning more about how and why their families were forced to flee Laos, and the role the United States government played, helped the Hmong students better understand the circumstances that led to their families becoming refugees. While this knowledge will likely not lessen any tensions between the Hmong students and their parents, it is possible that their understanding of the linkages between Hmong people and the United States will lead to a deeper understanding of their families' experiences.

The Hmong students described complex connections between their families' experiences during and after the Secret War, the history of the war that they learned about in school, their own and their parents' experiences with prejudice and hardship, the role the United States played during the Vietnam and Secret Wars, and how they would like outsiders to perceive Hmong people in the United States today. Before learning about the Vietnam War in school, the students all knew that the war was important but they were "fuzzy" on the details. They did not all know how the Secret War – which their family members lived through and fought in – connected to the better-known, wider Vietnam War. After learning in Ms. Adams' class that the Central Intelligence Agency recruited Hmong soldiers through General Vang Pao to fight the Pathet Lao in the place of U.S. soldiers, the students were more vehement about their non-Hmong classmates learning about the wars. Theresa connected these ideas during her second interview:

I think the Secret War shouldn't have been kept such a secret because even if people were tired of it they had to know that there are these people out there helping out the Americans, and losing their lives because of it and that's why

they're over here.

The Hmong students felt that the sacrifices made by Hmong people during the Secret War were made on the behalf of the American people, and therefore should be known about by current residents of the United States. For the Hmong students, building this knowledge among their peers could have an immediate and concrete impact – the further acceptance and appreciation of themselves and their families by the larger non-Hmong community. Both prior research and the words of the students in the present study indicate that the children of Hmong refugees living in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 2011 may still be grappling with these issues, and that the curricula to which they are exposed about their families' pasts may help them better make sense of their families' struggles.

*Additionally, including the Hmong students' heritage history in the formal forum of the public school history classroom may help their peers develop a better understanding of the intertwined histories of the United States and Hmong people, as well as a greater appreciation for and tolerance of Hmong people living in the United States today.*

**Chinese students and the Cultural Revolution.** The Chinese students were the only students who seemed to struggle with how to feel about their heritage and their (and/or their parents') homeland in relation to the heritage event. This is likely owing in part to the fact that the Chinese students' focal event was the only event in this study that did not involve an outside perpetrator. Chinese people were both perpetrators and victims during both the Cultural Revolution and Beijing Massacre. While the Hmong students could point to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, and the Jewish students could point to the Nazis, as the people responsible for the suffering of their parents,

grandparents, and ancestors, the Chinese students could only point to people with whom they share a national identity.

The varied backgrounds and experiences of the Chinese students and their families meant that the students and their families had not all had the same impressions of Mao, the Cultural Revolution, or the actions of the government during the Beijing Massacre. This contrast is most stark when looking at the stories told by Naomi and Joseph. Naomi and Joseph had both immigrated to the United States with their families as older children (around the age of ten), and therefore could remember their lives in China as children. Naomi's family suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution, when her grandfather was forced to leave his job as a professor in Beijing and her family lost their property and belongings. She also stated that "I think the citizens, they all know that Mao is not what...the school taught you about," implying that all Chinese citizens knew that the heroic portrayal of Chairman Mao in Chinese schools was not accurate. However, Joseph painted a much different picture of both life under Mao and modern Chinese life. He discussed how his mother, who was from Hunan, was able to attend university because of the reforms Mao instituted for peasants. He also talked about Mao being his grandparents' "great hero." These two students with seemingly similar backgrounds provide two drastically different images of both historic and modern China, both drawn from their own experiences and the words of their families. This type of dissonance within the voices of the participating students is unique to the Chinese case.

It is also interesting to note the dissonance in light of the previous research which has looked at the collective memory of residents of communist regimes. For instance,



Wertsch (2000) examined the views of ethnic Estonians in Estonia about the events which led to Estonia's annexation by the Soviet Union. He discovered that the interviewees could tell two versions of the story – the official version promulgated by the state and an unofficial version pieced together from stories told by family members, friends, and underground media. He concluded that the interviewees “demonstrated what might be called a pattern of ‘knowing but not believing’ in the case of the official history” (p. 39); in other words, they knew and could recite the official version of the past but chose to believe the unofficial version. Wertsch names schools as one of the purveyors of the official narrative in Estonia.

This idea is interesting when looking at the narratives and beliefs of Naomi and Joseph, because unlike Wertsch's subjects, these students must contend with two official versions of Chinese history as well as their own, individual unofficial heritage stories. These students' first encounter with official Chinese history happened in China, where they attended state-run elementary schools for their first years of schooling. Their second encounter with official Chinese history was in Mr. Larson's class. While the historical narratives put forth in state-run schools in Soviet-era Estonia and modern China are likely different in nature from the narratives put forth by history teachers in U.S. schools, the nature of the school as a source of “official knowledge” is not in dispute.

Wertsch acknowledges that his subjects give similar accounts of the official history and varied unofficial accounts, but notes that the subjects uniformly reject the official history. Naomi and Joseph present a different picture of the way people come to understand a past about which they have heard multiple, conflicting official and

unofficial accounts. Naomi's family's history seems to coincide more with what she learned in Mr. Larson's class – that Mao was not a “great hero” and that what she learned in her Chinese elementary school was an inaccurate portrayal of the past. Joseph's family history, however, lies in stark contrast to Naomi's; and therefore he is more skeptical of what he learned in Mr. Larson's class. *Importantly, it seems that each student has placed a greater deal of trust and authority in the official narrative that corresponds most closely with what they have heard from their families.* Prior research (Epstein, 2009) has also shown that students are more likely to trust an official narrative if it is similar to the stories they have heard from their families.

**Jewish students and the Holocaust.** The history of the Holocaust is the only one of the three heritage events that currently exists within a larger U.S. historical narrative. In fact, participants in each of the other two groups referenced the Holocaust at some point during the interview process as a means of describing their connections to and understandings of heritage histories. The Holocaust occupies a prominent and revered place in a larger U.S. narrative which has made the murders of eleven million people, and the enslavement and dehumanization of millions more, the epitome of evil (Novick, 1999). Therefore, the Holocaust seems to remain on a pedestal (Flanzbaum, 1999); questioning why or if it should be taught in a public school classroom was a task with which the Jewish students had difficulty engaging. As Rosenfeld (2011) notes:

The injunction to remember is a constant of virtually every work of Holocaust testimony and reflection that has come down to us, yet the question of *what* is to be remembered is intimately tied to *who* it is doing the remembering and to the

cultural priorities and pressures that determine or impede historical memory in the first place. (p. 53).

Here, Rosenfeld discusses the historical memory of the Holocaust in U.S. society as a whole, yet his words are prescient when considering the words and ideas of the Jewish students in the present study. Rosenfeld's focus on the exhortations to remember in a manner that is somewhat divorced from what is being remembered may account for some of the Jewish students' uncertainty when they were asked why it might be important to remember and learn about the Holocaust.

For instance, when Aaron tried to reconcile the idea that learning about the Holocaust would prevent future genocides from occurring with his knowledge that genocides have occurred since 1945, he concluded that "there's nothing that we can really do to stop that fact, because, humans are humans." Here, despite his deep, detailed, complex understanding of the Holocaust, Aaron does not seem able to question the ultimate lesson of the Holocaust, as it has been handed down to him – that genocide should never again happen. Aaron had learned about the Holocaust from his parents and from his teachers at the Jewish parochial school he attended through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. During his first interview, he gave the most thorough and historically accurate timeline of the Holocaust of any of the Jewish students, and was often consulted as a de facto "expert" on questions related to Judaism or lesser-known details of the Holocaust during class discussions. Still, like the other Jewish students in this study, he was unable to move beyond the "never again" trope to engage in a more complex fashion with whatever lessons the Holocaust may or may not have to offer him and his peers, and how the world

has or has not learned those lessons. Aaron removes any idea of human agency or choice from the equation – by essentially saying that human beings are genocidal in nature – moments after stating:

The infamous phrase “never again.” Also, just because it’s something to think about and something to remember and it shouldn’t happen ever again, and nothing even close to it should ever happen again. It’s really kind of a bad thing, and no genocide should ever really be allowed to perpetrate.

With these words, Aaron demonstrates that he has internalized the “never again” trope but has not thought more deeply about lasting lessons people may learn from the Holocaust that would affect real change in the present or future. Aaron knows he’s supposed to remember the Holocaust – which, judging from his extensive knowledge about the subject, he will continue to do – but he does not seem terribly sure about why he is supposed to remember or what he is supposed to do with his memories.

One of the ways in which the Jewish students connected to the victims of Holocaust was through the Jewish identity they shared with the victims. As Deborah said: “If I had been born in, the 1930’s or something, I would have probably experienced that, if I lived in Europe or something.” Neither the Hmong nor the Chinese students put themselves in the place of the people who experienced the Vietnam and Secret Wars or the Cultural Revolution. There are several reasons why the Jewish students may have been more likely to see themselves as potential victims of the Holocaust. First, it has been argued (Flanzbaum, 1999; Novick, 1999) that Jews in the United States began to identify with the Holocaust in the 1970s as a means of maintaining or establishing status

as outsiders despite U.S. Jews' success in a variety of fields and general inclusion in mainstream, middle and upper-middle class white society. In this way, U.S. Jews were able to identify themselves as a visible ethnic minority with a history of suffering (though, interestingly, the event U.S. Jews chose to demonstrate their suffering – the Holocaust – did not occur on U.S. soil). Therefore, it may not be surprising that the Jewish students in the present study tried on a victim identity when discussing their connection to the Holocaust.

Additionally, the Jewish students are much further removed temporally from the Holocaust than the Hmong students are from the Vietnam and Secret Wars and than the Chinese students are from the Cultural Revolution. The closest relative any of the Jewish students could identify as having been involved in the Holocaust was Sophia's grandmother, who fled Europe with her family as a very young child. Unlike the Jewish students, all of the Hmong and Chinese students' parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles had lived through the Vietnam and Secret Wars and the Cultural Revolution. While these events may have impacted and affected the students' families in many different ways, the fact remains that the Hmong and Chinese students in this study are being raised by people for whom these heritage histories are also personal histories. The Hmong and Chinese students are growing up in the United States as first and second generation immigrants. The memories and ideas that their parents have about the heritage events may not be constant topics of conversation between the students and their parents – nor is the Holocaust a constant topic of conversation between the Jewish students and their parents – yet those memories are always a part of the parents' lives. The memories are therefore

very close to the students as well, and it is potentially easy for both the students and the parents to see the vast differences between the lives of the students participating in this study, growing up in the United States, attending U.S. schools and engaging in U.S. society, and the lives the parents lived as teenagers in Laos and China. It is possible that the distance created by these differences – by the change in environment, government, language – is much greater and more palpable than the distance between the Jewish students and the Holocaust.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to note that all of the students, in their own ways, felt connections to these histories. This is not surprising, but it is instructive, as more students who have similar backgrounds to the students in this study populate history classrooms in the United States. *The students' ability to reconstruct their existing narratives to accommodate new information while keeping their families' stories as the centerpoints of the narratives demonstrates teenagers' ability to perform complex historical thinking, even about subjects that may hold heavy emotional weight.*

The differences in the three groups' entrances to the United States – the Hmong students as the children of refugees, the Chinese students as immigrants and the children of immigrants, and the Jewish students as the children of families that have lived in the United States for generations – are also instructive, as they seem to have some impact on the students' historical understanding. The Hmong students see a direct link between their status as the children of refugees and the importance of the public telling of their heritage history. Their identity as the children of Hmong refugees is directly tied to the

heritage history explored in this study. The Jewish students, on the other hand, seem to long for a closer connection to this history, going so far as to identify directly with the victims of the Holocaust as a means of connecting to this increasingly distant history. The Chinese students' relationship to the Cultural Revolution is mediated by time, distance, and their families' experiences during that era.

While there is much left to learn from these students, the themes and ideas explored in this chapter provide valuable insight into the ways students construct narratives about heritage histories. As all of them, in their own ways, seem to care about and identify with these histories – none less so after learning about the events in school and some more so – it is clear that including heritage histories in the public school history classroom is an important step teachers can take to include their students' stories in the official knowledge of the classroom.

## Conclusion

I believe that the themes outlined here are the most important and relevant to the current field of research on history education because, though they stem from the words and ideas of the participants of this study, they are applicable to students and teachers in a broad range of settings and with a wide variety of backgrounds. The present study sheds some light on how three groups of students from specific ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds understand and identify with heritage histories both in and out of school. These findings illustrate how thoughtfully and critically the students viewed the heritage events and used them to connect to and identify with the past, as well as with their families and affinity groups. It is important to note that all of the students felt connections to these histories due to their heritage, yet were able to engage in a rigorous, disciplinary study of the histories in school. *Their identification as members of the three affinity groups did not inhibit their abilities or desire to analyze and evaluate the history of the focal events; in fact, some of the students craved this type of work, as it helped them to better understand the histories they have inherited.* The students' critical engagement, in turn, was balanced by their abiding respect for and trust in their families' stories about the past. Their ability to reconstruct their existing narratives to accommodate new information while still keeping their families' stories as the centerpoints of the narratives, demonstrates the students' ability to perform complex historical thinking, even regarding subjects that may hold heavy social and emotional weight.



In addition to the students who grounded their narratives in their families' experiences, there were other students who seemed adrift in the historical landscape. Some of these students, like Pa, Theresa, and Olivia, did not feel that they had sufficient knowledge about the historical events as would befit someone of their heritage. Their hunger for deeper and more extensive knowledge demonstrates their feelings of connection to their heritage, even in the absence of having specific family stories to relate to. Despite the gaps in their knowledge, their willingness to engage in complex moral and ethical debates, and their desire to find truth and meaning in these histories, are testaments to the emotional intelligence and earnest curiosity of these students. It is abundantly clear that all students in this study genuinely desired to engage in historical inquiry, *perhaps precisely because the historical inquiry was so profoundly personal in nature*. The Hmong and Chinese students were eager to learn more about seminal events and to contextualize the stories they had heard from their families, and to look more critically at the events from multiple perspectives. The Jewish students, most of whom were not related to Holocaust survivors, felt strong ties to the event through their Jewish heritage and were grateful for the opportunity to conduct in-depth investigations into the myriad stories and experiences of Jews during the Holocaust.

### **Implications**

The impact of including heritage histories in public school classrooms cannot be underestimated. For both the Hmong and Chinese students, including their heritage histories in the public school classroom showed these students that the stories of their parents and grandparents are important and relevant to a wider audience. This is

particularly relevant when considering the alternative; if the three teachers had NOT chosen to explicitly include the heritage histories in their classrooms, it is likely that the students would have felt marginalized and excluded from the classroom community. They would have been less likely to engage with the content of the course and perhaps less likely to perform the complex historical thinking that is evidenced in this paper.

Including these histories in the official knowledge of the classroom legitimated the stories and often prompted the students to have open discussions with their parents about what they were learning in school. That the inclusion of the heritage histories in the students' history classes served as starting points for conversations between the students and their parents is particularly crucial; several of the parents indicated that they wanted to share their stories with their children. However, the parents knew that if they tried to initiate these conversations with their teenage children, the children would be far less likely to listen or appreciate what the parents had to say. Naomi's mother, Julia, spoke about this phenomenon during her interview:

*Julia:* [I'm] happy because [my] daughter's, recently, when she went home, she started to ask questions about '64, Tiananmen Square, and about Mao, and I'm happy that she asked me those questions, because I knew that if I just – if I just tell her about these things, she wouldn't be interested.

*SL:* So having it in school sparked her interest?

*Julia:* Yeah. [Mr. Larson] teach her, she's interested. But I teach her, she's not interested! (laughs)

When an outside party – the students’ teachers – instead initiated these conversations, the students were then much more receptive and open to discussing the issues with their parents.

It is important for history teachers and teacher educators to remember that those stories which often appear as footnotes and sidebars in the official history can actually be integral pieces of our students’ lives. It is important to recognize this, and to work to move our students’ pasts – and therefore the students themselves – to the center of the story.

The present findings may be particularly instructive to teachers and researchers of history education. As students with different national pasts continue to enter U.S. classrooms, it behooves teachers to remember that their students may enter the classroom with not only heritage histories and family stories, but also existing official historical narratives which may conflict with the official narrative of the United States. That his Chinese students would enter the room with very different ideas about Chinese history was something that Mr. Larson, due to his years of working with both mainland China and Taiwanese students, had anticipated and had therefore tailored his curriculum accordingly. Mr. Larson’s experience and sensitivity regarding his students’ prior historical knowledge contributed to his teaching, and to his students’ ability to develop their own understandings of the past by combining what they had heard from their families with what they learned in Mr. Larson’s classroom.

Interestingly, each of the three teachers included in their curricula one story which riveted the students and shaped, altered, interrupted, questioned, or completed their

existing narratives about the heritage histories. For the Hmong students, this was Ms. Adams' brief discussion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the role the trail played in involving Laos in the Vietnam War. For the Chinese students, this was Mr. Larson's showing of *The Tank Man* documentary about the 1989 Beijing Massacre. For the Jewish students, this was Ms. Harris' inclusion of lessons on the actions of the Jewish Partisans. In each of these cases, most of the students used this new knowledge to reconstruct their heritage narratives. These three curricular choices had profound effects on the students' historical thinking and helped them to connect what they were learning in school with their families' pasts and their heritage. While teachers may not know exactly which parts of history will resonate most with their students, it is important for teachers to think about including specific stories that they think might resonate with their students.

Teachers should also remember that the temporal and physical distance these students feel from the heritage events impacts and shapes their understandings of and connections to the events themselves, as well as their heritage identities. While the Hmong and Chinese students felt that the heritage events were located in a distant and somewhat unreachable past that had severely impacted their families' lives and therefore impacted their own lives on a much smaller scale, the Jewish students felt close to the Holocaust despite the longer lapsed time between the event and the present day and the lack of direct, personal interaction with relatives who experienced the Holocaust. Teachers and administrators should be aware of the different ways time and space, as well as public and private perceptions about the past, impact and shape students' ideas

about not only their heritage histories, but how, when, and why those histories should be shared in the classroom. It seems clear that each group of students wants their own story told in the formal and official setting of the classroom.

### **Further Research**

The present analysis of the collected data leaves open many paths for further research. First, it would be interesting to examine more closely the words of the students and their parents in a more in-depth analysis. Several of the students cite stories that they have heard from their parents; did the parents tell the same stories in the interviews? How important is it to the students and their parents that the students know about and remember these histories? That the students' classmates know about these histories? Looking closely at these questions within each individual case may illustrate how parents and students view the importance of heritage histories, and how they think those histories should be told both at home and at school. Additionally, several of the students discussed their connection to the heritage histories in light of their multiethnic identities. As the numbers of students with multiethnic backgrounds grow in classrooms across the United States, an in-depth analysis of the connections these students feel to the different histories of their ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds would be relevant. Finally, a cross-case analysis of the parents' understandings of and thoughts about the importance of the histories would be very interesting, as it would shed light on how different groups of adults make sense of heritage histories.

The present study opens many paths for further research. One of the limitations of this study is that focuses solely on heritage histories, which may have increased the

likelihood that students would be engaged by the curricula presented by their teachers. Conducting a more in-depth, longitudinal study of a classroom with several heritage groups (not uncommon in U.S. secondary schools) over the course of several units would provide a fuller picture of the lasting impacts of students' engagement with heritage histories in the classroom. Do the students approach other historical eras and events with similar enthusiasm? Acknowledging that not every unit or lesson in a history class can be directly tied to a student's heritage, how else are history teachers engaging their students in rigorous historical inquiry?

This type of longitudinal study would also allow researchers to examine how students react to, understand, and engage with histories to which they do not feel a heritage connection, but to which their classmates do. To use one of the heritage groups from the present study, this would entail a study of both the Hmong students' understanding of and interest in the Vietnam War unit as well as the understanding and interest of their classmates who are not Hmong. Schweber has discussed the idea that there exists in U.S. schools a "Holocaust fatigue" (2006a); a study which examines the reactions of both Jewish and non-Jewish students to a Holocaust unit would be particularly relevant. While the Jewish students in this study believed the Holocaust unit in their history class was important for both their own edification, and that of their peers, I overheard a few rumblings from students about "always learning about the Holocaust." Examining how multicultural groups of students engage with different heritage histories in the shared space of the public school classroom would provide important insights into

how students learn to hold discussions with peers of myriad racial, ethnic, national, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds.

### **Significance of the Study**

Research has shown that teachers who find a way to connect their content with students' lives are more effective in engaging students and helping students develop and demonstrate critical thinking skills (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, students who are able to see the connections between the content they learn in school and their own lives are more likely to stay in school. My vision for this study is that it will give researchers, teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and even students, an idea of how and why students understand "their own" histories. In turn, I hope that the above-mentioned adults will take what they've learned and use it to build more engaging, authentic, relevant history classes for their students.

One of the goals of public education in general, and social studies education specifically, is to help students develop an understanding of what it means to be a responsible, involved citizen of the United States. If students feel and see that the histories which are important to their families are also important and valued in a school curriculum, it is possible that students will begin to make these connections more readily. It is somewhat unrealistic to expect students to be engaged and involved in a society in which they do not see themselves, their families, or their histories. By investigating how students are making these connections, this study can help teachers develop lessons which make these connections obvious. Students who see their history and identity valued and included in the formal school curriculum may be more likely to see that these

histories and identities have a place within a larger U.S. history and identity. The mirroring of a group's past and pain in the classroom can help students feel that there is room for this past in their American identity. Having their collective memory, their heritage, incorporated into the cultural memory of the U.S. may help develop a U.S. identity in these students. In the process of making "their" past a part of "our" past, this country can continue to step closer to its ideals of equality for, and inclusion of, all.

On a larger scale, this study seeks to help us better understand that fractured and fractious state of our nation. While this goal is far more grandiose and idealistic than can possibly be attained by this small study, I do believe this study will give insight into how we – the citizens and residents of the United States of America – begin to incorporate "their" history into "our" history. This study is focused on three dissimilar groups. While one group, the Jewish students, are members of a group whose traumatic past has been incorporated, for myriad reasons and in countless ways, into the larger U.S. narrative and collective consciousness, the other two groups, the Chinese and Hmong students, are members of groups whose similar pasts remain on the outskirts of our national collective remembering. Importantly, I believe that this study has given voice to those stories and has demonstrated how those closest to the stories and the trauma, pain, tragedy, conflict, anger, and pride wrapped up in those stories make meaning of them. Ultimately, part of the work of incorporating, including, and valuing new and minority members of U.S. society involves incorporating, including, and valuing their histories as part of our own.



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## Appendix A

### Student Interview Protocol

- I. *Writing Prompt:* In order to get us started today, I'd like you to jot down some thoughts about the Holocaust. Think about what you know about the Holocaust. How would you explain it to someone who had never heard of it? You may write your ideas in sentences or bullet points, whatever works best for you. If you want, these are a few things to think about to get you started...
- What do you think are the most important events related to the Holocaust?  
Why?
  - What do you think are the most important people related to the Holocaust?  
Why?
  - What should people learn from the Holocaust? (e.g., ideas, morals, values, lessons)
  - What connection do you feel to the Holocaust? What does it mean to you?
- II. *Interview Questions:*
- a. What did you write down?
  - b. Why did you choose the people and events that you did?
  - c. Do you think someone else would have picked other people or events?  
Why? If your parents or grandparents were asked the same questions, what do you think might be different about their choices? Why?
  - d. If your teacher was asked the same questions, what do you think might be different about her choices? Why?

- e. What parts of the story of the Holocaust have you learned from family members that you have not learned about in school?
- f. What parts of the story of the Holocaust have you learned about in school that you have not learned about from your family?
- g. Do you think it's important for people who aren't Jewish to know about the Holocaust? Why or why not?
- h. Who do you trust to tell this story? Why?
- i. Does how you talk about the Holocaust change depending on if you are talking to someone who is Jewish or someone who isn't Jewish? How and why?
- j. What does this event mean to you? Do you feel some sort of responsibility to this history?
- k. What impact has the Holocaust had on your life?

#### Parent Interview Protocol

- a. Tell me the story of the Holocaust.
- b. Where does your knowledge of this event come from (personal experience, family stories, books or film, school, etc)?
- c. What have you told your child about this event?
- d. Do you think your child cares about this event?
- e. Do you feel a connection to this event?
- f. Do you think your child feels connected to this event?

- g. Are there lessons to be learned from this event? What are they? Why?
- h. Do you think it's important for the Holocaust to be taught in your child's history class? Why/why not?
- i. Who do you trust to tell this story?
- j. Do you think it's important for people who aren't Jewish to know about the Holocaust? Why or why not?
- k. Does the way you talk about the Holocaust change depending on if you are talking to someone who is Jewish or someone who isn't Jewish? How and why?
- l. What does this event mean to you? Do you feel some sort of responsibility to this history?
- m. What impact has the Holocaust had on your life?

#### Teacher Interview Protocol

- a. Tell me the story of the Holocaust.
- b. Where does your knowledge of this event come from (personal experience, family stories, books or film, school, etc)?
- c. Do you feel a connection to this event?
- d. Would you teach this subject differently if you didn't have Jewish students? How and why?
- e. How does your own heritage impact your teaching of this event?
- f. Do you think your students care about this event?

- g. Do you think your students feel connected to this event?
- h. What lessons are to be learned from this event? Why?
- i. Why do you think it's important for this event to be taught in your history class?
- j. Do you think it's important for people who aren't Jewish to know about the Holocaust? Why or why not?
- k. Does the story of the Holocaust change depending on if you are talking to someone who is Jewish or someone who isn't Jewish?
- l. Who do you trust to tell this story?
- m. What impact has the Holocaust had on your life?

## Appendix B

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s),

My name is Sara Levy and I am a doctoral student from the University of Minnesota. I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Social Studies Education, and am presently in Elmdale working on my dissertation project. I am writing today to introduce the project and to ask you and your child to be part of this project.

I am interested in learning more about how students understand histories with which they have a particular connection. It seems that the best way to investigate this is to talk directly with teens to find out how they think about history and what connections they see between themselves and the past.

As your child has identified him or herself as Chinese, I would like to speak with your child about their understanding of Chinese history. Since your child's class is studying the Cultural Revolution in school now, that is the topic I'd like to talk with them about. It does not matter how much your child knows about this event, if they have learned about it in the past, or if your family was directly involved in or affected by the Cultural Revolution. I am simply interested in how your child thinks about history in connection to him or herself.

Since parents and families play an important role in teaching their children about history which may have impacted and influenced their children's lives, I would also like to speak with you about this event. Again, it does not matter how much you know about this event or if you were directly involved or affected by the Cultural Revolution.

Attached to this letter are two consent forms (one for you and one for your child) which outline the participation requirements, as well as the interview questions that I will ask both you and your child. If you and your child decide to be a part of this project, you will each participate in interviews. I will interview your child twice - once before and one after he or she learns about this event in school. Your child will receive a \$5 gift card after each interview. I will interview you once. Each interview will last approximately 45 minutes and will be scheduled at your and your child's convenience. I can meet you at your home, Franklin High School, or other location of your choice. You and your child do not need to be interviewed at the same time, though that is fine if you prefer.

Please know that participation in this project is 100% voluntary, and no identifying information will be used in any publications resulting from this project. The only people who will know you are participating are you and me.

If you choose to participate, please complete the attached forms and return them to Mr. Larson's class with your child by Wednesday, March 2.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions, comments, or concerns you have about this study.

Thank you,

Sara Levy  
[levyx066@umn.edu](mailto:levyx066@umn.edu)  
612.968.5401 (cell)

### Student ASSENT Form

#### *Telling Stories: How Students Navigate the Construction of Heritage Narratives*

Dear Student,

My name is Sara Levy; I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota. I will be spending time in your World History class this year because I am working on a research project that is examining how students understand history, especially those parts of history with which they may have a personal connection. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. I also ask that you take home the parental consent form to your parents or guardians and discuss the research with them.

#### **Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how and why students put together different stories about the past. As I am particularly interested in how students make sense of histories with which they may have a personal or heritage connection, I want to talk to Chinese students about the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, in order to participate in this study, you will need to identify as Chinese.

#### **Procedures**

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to do three things:

- Participate in an interview with me before learning about the Cultural Revolution in school (about 45 minutes).
- Participate in an interview with me after learning about the Cultural Revolution in school (about 45 minutes).
- Let me collect copies of any work you do during the Cultural Revolution unit (such as papers, tests, essays, etc).

Since I am interested in how students understand history from both a school and personal perspective, I would also like to interview your parents. If you choose to participate in this study, I will send a separate letter home with you for you to give your parents to



explain my project. I will interview them once at a location of their choice. I am interested in finding out how your understanding of this history and their understanding are similar and different.

### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study**

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. You will receive two \$5 gift cards as compensation for your participation in this research.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your grades, current or future relations with the University of Minnesota, Mr. Larson, or Franklin High School. If you decide to participate, you are free to refuse to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records. I will be the only person with access to the digital voice recordings of your interviews. The voice recordings will be used for research purposes only and will be erased upon completion of the research.

### **Contacts and Questions**

The researcher conducting this study is Sara Levy. Her advisors are Patricia Avery and Benjamin Jacobs. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact them at:

Sara Levy – (612) 968-5401 or [levyx066@umn.edu](mailto:levyx066@umn.edu)  
Patricia Avery, PhD – (612) 625-5802 or [avery001@umn.edu](mailto:avery001@umn.edu)  
Benjamin Jacobs, PhD – (212) 998-5460 or [bjacobs@nyu.edu](mailto:bjacobs@nyu.edu)

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Statement of Assent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I assent to participate in the study.

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

In order to arrange the first interview, please provide your preferred contact information below.

Student preferred contact (email or phone):

\_\_\_\_\_

#### Parent CONSENT Form

#### *Telling Stories: How Students Navigate the Construction of Heritage Narratives*

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Sara Levy; I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota. I will be spending time in your child's World History class this year because I am working on a research project that is examining how students understand history, especially those parts of history with which they may have a personal connection. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to their participation in the study. I am also asking for your participation in this project.

#### **Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how and why students put together different stories about the past. As I am particularly interested in how students make sense of histories with which they may have a personal or heritage connection, I want to talk to Chinese students about the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, in order to participate in this study, your child will need to identify as Chinese.

#### **Procedures**

As a participant in this study, **your child** will be asked to do three things:

- Participate in an interview with me before learning about the Cultural Revolution in school (about 45 minutes).

- Participate in an interview with me after learning about the Cultural Revolution in school (about 45 minutes).
- Let me collect copies of any work s/he does during the Cultural Revolution unit (such as papers, tests, essays, etc).

Since I am interested in how students understand history from both a school and personal perspective, I would also like to interview you and/or your spouse. I am interested in finding out how your understanding of this history and your child's understanding are similar and different.

As a participant in this study, **you** will be asked to do one thing:

- Participate in an interview with me at a location and time convenient to you (about 45 minutes).

### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study**

There are minimal risks and no direct benefits associated with your participation in this research. Your child will receive two \$5 gift cards as compensation for their participation in this research.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your child's grades, current or future relations with the University of Minnesota, Mr. Larson, or Franklin High School. If you and your child decide to participate, you are both free to refuse to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you or your child as subjects. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records. I will be the only person with access to the digital voice recordings of your interviews. The voice recordings will be used for research purposes only and will be erased upon completion of the research.

### **Contacts and Questions**

The researcher conducting this study is Sara Levy. Her advisors are Patricia Avery and Benjamin Jacobs. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact them at:

Sara Levy – (612) 968-5401 or [levyx066@umn.edu](mailto:levyx066@umn.edu)

Patricia Avery, PhD – (612) 625-5802 or [avery001@umn.edu](mailto:avery001@umn.edu)  
Benjamin Jacobs, PhD – (212) 998-5460 or [bjacobs@nyu.edu](mailto:bjacobs@nyu.edu)

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You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I assent to participate in the study.

Child's name \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

In order to arrange the first student interview and the parent/guardian interview, please provide your preferred contact information below.

Student preferred contact (email or phone):

\_\_\_\_\_

Parent preferred contact (email or

phone):\_\_\_\_\_