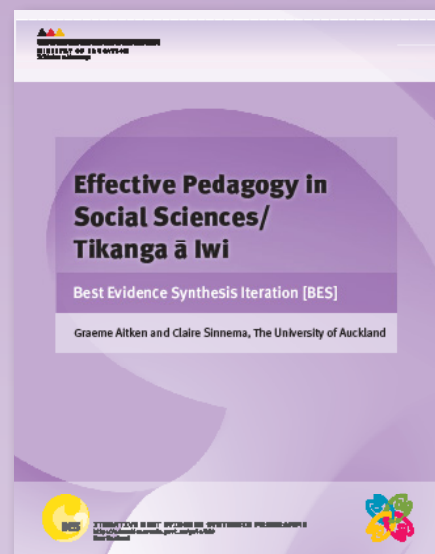


# Improve outcomes by actively engaging learners

This is one of a series of cases that illustrate the findings of the best evidence syntheses (BESs). Each is designed to support the professional learning of educators, leaders and policy makers.



## BES cases: Insight into what works

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The best evidence syntheses (BESs) bring together research evidence about ‘what works’ for diverse (all) learners in education. Recent BESs each include a number of cases that describe actual examples of professional practice and then analyse the findings. These cases support educators to grasp the big ideas behind effective practice at the same time as they provide vivid insight into their application.

Building as they do on the work of researchers and educators, the cases are trustworthy resources for professional learning.

### Using the BES cases

The BES cases overview provides a brief introduction to each of the cases. It is designed to help you quickly decide which case or cases could be helpful in terms of your particular improvement priorities.

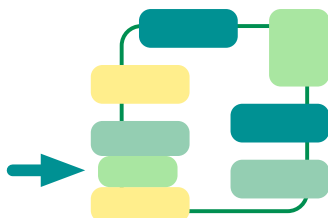
Use the cases with colleagues as catalysts for reflecting on your own professional practice and as starting points for delving into other sources of information, including related sections of the BESs. To request copies of the source studies, use the Research Behind the BES link on the BES website.

The conditions for effective professional learning are described in the Teacher Professional Learning and development BES and condensed into the ten principles found in the associated International Academy of Education summary (Timperley, 2008).

Note that, for the purpose of this series, the cases have been re-titled to more accurately signal their potential usefulness.

### Responsiveness to diverse (all) learners

Use the BES cases and the appropriate curriculum documents to design a response that will improve student outcomes



The different BESs consistently find that any educational improvement initiative needs to be responsive to the diverse learners in the specific context. Use the inquiry and knowledge-building cycle tool to design a collaborative approach to improvement that is genuinely responsive to your learners

### Improve outcomes by actively engaging learners

This case vividly illustrates the difference between an effective teaching approach, which actively engages learners (for example, through the use of simulation), and a less effective teaching approach that relies substantially on teacher talk, textbooks, and students copying notes. While the case has relevance for teaching across the curriculum, the specific context is a history unit on civil rights and racism. As such, the case also has important implications for culturally responsive teaching.

### Source

Grant, S. G. (2001). It's just the facts, or is it? The relationship between teachers' practices and students' understandings of history. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 29(1), pp. 65–108.

### Introduction

Grant observed two history teachers with distinctly different approaches teaching a civil rights unit. Subsequent interviews with seven students revealed a strong correlation between the teachers' practices and their students' ideas about history in general and the civil rights era in particular. The students of one of the teachers had views of history that were much more thoughtful, nuanced, and complex than the students of the other. Moreover, they saw history as a more vibrant and powerful influence on their lives (p. 83). This case outlines the two different approaches and the contrasting outcomes for students.

### Targeted learning outcome/s

Three aspects of historical thinking in relation to civil rights:

- historical knowledge
- historical significance
- historical empathy.

### Learner/s and learning context

Both teachers were at the same school, preparing students for the same high-stakes state examinations, and both regarded the teaching of civil rights as important. The interviewed students were all European Americans: four female and three male. Six of them averaged grades in the 90s; the other had grades in the 80s.

### The pedagogy

Grant's study contrasts the pedagogies of the two teachers' who were teaching the same content in the same school to similar students. The different features of their approaches can be seen in the transcripts below and the overview on page 290.

For the eight lessons in the civil rights unit, Linda Strait's approach was to use a range of different activities and resources and to involve everyone (including herself) as active participants in the learning. One activity that was particularly significant for students' learning was a simulation. In it, "students imagine that they are living in the early 1950s and that a local skating rink owner refuses to admit minority customers. In small groups, students are to create a strategy for winning access to the rink."

Each of the groups has 10 minutes to plan its approach and six minutes in the simulation (p. 76). In the transcript, the teacher – playing the skating rink operator – is seated on a chair in the middle of the room, and each group approaches her in turn (p. 78):

### Linda Strait's pedagogy: 'master arranger'

The first group (Jerry, Sue, Linda, Rachel, and Terry – all white students) approach Strait. They do so sheepishly and hesitantly. Strait immediately launches into her character. "How did you folks get in here?" she demands.

Sue: *We want to skate.*

Strait: *Sorry, whites only.*

Jerry: *What's the difference?*

Strait: *That's the policy, that's always been the policy ... in this town.*

Jerry: *... that isn't fair ...*

Linda: *You're going to lose customers.*

Strait: *... no problem so far ... you (pointing to Jerry, presuming he is white and the others are minorities) can skate, but they have to go.*

Jerry: *We have no choice but to protest.*

Rachel: *And we'll encourage our friends not to come.*

Strait: *... I'm not too concerned ... As you can see, it's busy tonight ...*

**Linda  
Strait's  
pedagogy:  
'master  
arranger'**

Jerry asks if the students can regroup and come back. Strait, still in character, asks him what he's talking about. He tries to explain that he's talking to Strait, the teacher.

Strait: *I own a skating rink. I don't know any teacher. (To Jerry) He can skate, but the rest of you got to get out of here.*

Rachel: *If you don't let us skate, we're going to block the door.*

Strait: *Well, that's fine. I'll just have you arrested ... I suggest you leave or I'm going to call to get you removed from the premises.*

As Jerry's group leaves, Ned, a member of the audience, calls out, "Man, this is impossible!" Back in their seats, the group huddles and returns for a second try.

Jerry says, "We have to emphasise that this is a racist facility."

Strait shrugs: "It's no different from any other in this town."

The other groups follow. Most echo the arguments about fairness and the loss of business, and issue threats of ensuing protests. Some try to broker special times for minority skaters; others appeal to Strait's courage in breaking with tradition. The last group uses some of these appeals and adds one new one:

The final group (two white boys, Ben and Steve; two white girls, Melissa and Anna; and one Chinese-American girl, Kim) approach Strait. She ignores them.

Finally, Melissa says, "Excuse me." Strait looks up.

Ben: *We'd like to skate in your rink.*

Strait: *You can skate, but the rest of you have to get out of here.*

Ben: *What you're doing is unconstitutional.*

Strait: *I know my constitution.*

Steve: *If you're going to segregate ...*

Strait: *Look, I'm not a lawyer, I'm a businesswoman ... But there's no law in this town that says I can't just have whites.*

Steve: *But if you kick us out, where can we go?*

Strait: *... not my problem. Find another place.*

Anna: *It's our right to skate ... Think of all the money you're losing.*

Strait: *Well, it's about closing time ... [This is a] teen curfew violation. (Ned calls out: "There was no teen curfew in the rules!") ... I need to be getting home ... There's no law that says I have to let you in.*

Kim: *Where are we supposed to go?*

Strait: *Go somewhere else.*

Melissa: *If the movie theater let us in, would you let us in?*

Strait: *That's an interesting question.*

Ben: *... are you thinking about it?*

Strait: *... but ... [if I did that, then others would be] ready to lynch me.*

Steve: *The minorities would stand up for you.*

Kim: *... think about it, you're a female ... How do you know that others wouldn't follow you?*

**George Blair's pedagogy: 'master storyteller'**

George Blair's approach emphasised narrative instruction – dramatic stories of key historical personalities, policies, and events, built using oratorical style (vocal inflections, emotion, personal reflections, and rhetorical questions) and emphasising facts.

The following transcript concerns how Dwight Eisenhower tried to negotiate foreign and domestic policy dilemmas (p. 71):

“Eisenhower was conservative ... But it will blow up in his face ... He made several appointments to the Supreme Court, but one at least is very liberal ... and (emphatically) that shocks the hell out of Eisenhower ... Remember there was tremendous pressure ... very serious things happen and early on in Eisenhower's presidency ... He's hit in the face with the Brown decision ... Eisenhower disagrees, but he has to enforce it and he does ... and there is a serious confrontation in the South ... Eisenhower also confronts the Soviets ...(dramatically) We hate the Soviet Union, we fear the Soviet Union ... We've got the H-bomb, but we're scared as hell. So the foreign policy John Foster Dulles comes up with ... [is] a sad state of affairs ... It's called massive retaliation ... [and it means] any aggression by the Communists and we would retaliate with everything we have, massively, with everything we have ...”

With that set-up, Blair begins a lecture on US foreign policy:

“Now the book doesn't tell you this ... In the 1956 Hungarian Revolution ... the Hungarians ask for our help and we don't give it to them ... (incredulously, loudly) Massive retaliation? We aren't going to retaliate at all! It's just sword rattling and it doesn't make any sense. We're not going to blow up the world. Who're we trying to kid? ...Massive retaliation; but we can't do that ... Massive retaliation ... what sense does that make? (quietly) But it shows how afraid we really are ... John Foster Dulles uses the idea of brinkmanship ... pushing the Soviets to the brink of war ... But how far can you push? ... The Soviets do the same thing ... Much of the Cold War, we push and push and push ... as far as we possibly can and there's tension, and stress, and anxiety. There's not a lot of fighting, but there's a helluva lot of tension, stress, and anxiety. (A student, David, asks, “Were any shots fired?”) Yes ... Korea, Vietnam ... between the US and the USSR? No ... they never attack one another directly ...”

**Outcomes**

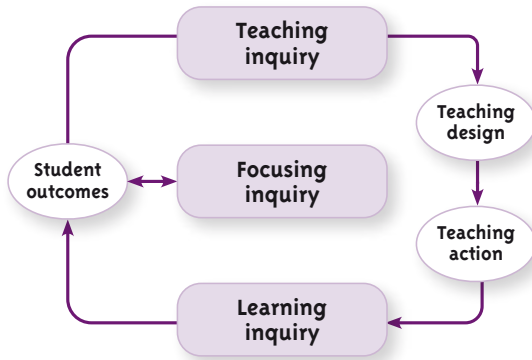
Key outcomes for students in the two classes are outlined in the overview on page 290. Strait's students came to see history not just as a series of facts, but as complex, tentative, and ambiguous. Her students were much more likely than Blair's to see a connection between the past and their own lives, and they also developed greater ability to see multiple perspectives and feel empathy.

The researcher cautioned that although the data suggested a correlation between teacher approach and student learning outcomes, the evidence was not strong enough to support a claim that the approaches *caused* the outcomes:

While Strait's and Blair's instructional practices may not cause their students' views of history, those practices figure prominently in explaining the differences across their students' views (p. 81) ... I am not proposing that teachers' instruction causes their students to hold the views of history that they do. Teaching and learning are richly complex activities ... looking at students' views on history in light of their teachers' instructional practices, then, is less about drawing a direct connection between the two than it is about exploring points of coherence (p. 102).

**Inquiry**

The evidence presented in this case can be used to inform teachers' inquiries into their own practice.



**Focusing inquiry**

What is most important and therefore worth spending time on?

**Teaching inquiry**

What might work best? What could I try?

**Learning inquiry**

What happened? Why did it happen?

Suggested questions:

- In what ways is your typical teaching approach similar to, or different from, the approaches of Strait and Blair?
- What aspects of your practice have helped or hindered students in developing awareness of the complexity of historical knowledge and understanding?
- What aspects of your practice have helped or hindered students in developing historical empathy?
- Which of the achievement objectives in your students' programmes might best be supported through a scenario or simulation approach?

**Other references**

Grant, S. G. (2001b). An uncertain lever: Exploring the influence of state-level testing in New York State on teaching social studies. *Teachers College Record*, 103(3), pp. 398–426.

Grant, S. G. (2003). *History lessons: Teaching, learning, and testing in US high school classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Linda Strait: 'master arranger'		George Blair: 'master storyteller'
<b>Alignment</b> <i>Align experiences to important outcomes</i>	<p>The activities and resources were aligned to the intended outcomes: while they dealt with different time periods, circumstances, and groups of people, all of the lessons focused specifically on civil rights.</p> <p>Students had multiple learning opportunities (eight lessons) in a range of modes: reading, writing, viewing, role-playing, video followed by group discussions, magazine articles, quiz (identifying civil rights / civil liberties), simulation, review activities.</p>	<p>The teacher did not focus exclusively on civil rights. He incorporated ideas into the context of the times. Civil rights were dealt with across several chapters in the textbook.</p>
<b>Interest</b> <i>Design experiences that interest students</i>	<p>Students' interest was maximised through their involvement in a simulation centred on a 1950s civil rights scenario. The teacher and students were all assigned roles and were able to experience the emotions of the situation at the same time as they were learning facts and concepts. The activity provided enabled students to go beyond an intellectual grasp of, and generalised sympathy for, the injustices suffered by African Americans and to gain an experiential grasp of civil rights issues.</p>	<p>The teacher emphasised facts in the stories and presented civil rights issues in chronological order as per the textbook.</p> <p>He used outline notes on overheads. The students copied these but rarely interrupted the teacher's monologue/lecture.</p>
<b>Community</b> <i>Build and sustain a learning community</i>	<p>The teacher's role was that of 'knowledge giver', 'knowledge evaluator', and 'creator of opportunities for students to work together'.</p> <p>The emphasis was on students applying their learning and feeling the emotions aroused by civil rights issues – in addition to learning facts and concepts.</p>	<p>Used narrative instructional style to recount the stories of historical personalities and describe policies and events. He built dramatic stories with the help of oratorical devices, such as vocal inflections, emotion, personal reflections, and rhetorical questions.</p>
<b>Connection</b> <i>Make connections to students' lives</i>	<p>In teaching her students about the civil rights movement, the teacher did not restrict herself to the big events and the experiences of the major players; she also made use of lesser known events and people, which helped make the content more accessible for the students. They were able to connect more easily with the content because they encountered it through the stories of ordinary people.</p>	<p>The teacher focused on the actions and experiences of certain key players. He emphasised the facts in the stories and presented civil rights issues in chronological order as per the textbook.</p>



<p><b>Linda Strait: ‘master arranger’</b></p>	<p><b>George Blair: ‘master storyteller’</b></p>
<p><b>Student outcomes</b></p> <p><b>Historical knowledge: ‘History as complex ideas’</b></p> <p>Students came to sense history as complex, tentative, and ambiguous. All those interviewed spoke of the understandings they had gained as a result of the unit. For instance, James said, “I knew discrimination, for example, existed, but I didn’t know it quite to the extent that I’ve learned about this year” (p. 84). The students also questioned their understandings. They were alert to the fact that historical knowledge of the same events was constructed differently by different people and that this gave them latitude to construct interpretations for themselves.</p> <p><b>Significance: thoughtful and textured connections between past and present</b></p> <p>All three of those interviewed made comments indicating that they were making thoughtful and textured connections between past and present. For instance, James recalled the connection Strait had made between the injustices suffered by African Americans in the 50s and 60s and those suffered by homosexuals today. Another example is found in Melissa’s reference to present-day issues of racism and prejudice in the US. It is important, however, to recognise, the danger of such connection-making leading to lineality (over-simplified, straight-line-type connections between the past and present) and presentism (overreliance on the present to interpret the past).</p> <p>Connection to students’ lives: Strait’s students were more likely than Blair’s to recognise a connection between what had happened in the past and their lives today.</p> <p><b>Empathy: disposition to consider others’ perspectives in relation to the learning context</b></p> <p>The interviews revealed that students had empathy in the sense that they were disposed to look for alternative perspectives on events, and they did this in the context of civil rights – considering, for example, the different perspectives that black and white people might have brought to scenes in a documentary, and how those perspectives may well have changed over time.</p>	<p><b>Student outcomes</b></p> <p><b>Historical knowledge: ‘History as the facts’</b></p> <p>Students sensed history as a series of facts: names, dates, places – a chronicle of what happened in the past. One saw it this way: “It’s like history is already made, you know what I mean? It’s facts. So I don’t know if there’s much you could discuss” (p. 83). None of the students thought that the content or stories in Blair’s class gave them any new or provocative ways of thinking about civil rights – they found it interesting, but it merely affirmed what they already knew.</p> <p><b>Significance: thin and weakly developed connections between past and present</b></p> <p>None of the connections made between past and present related to civil rights. The connections that were made were weak. For instance, Kate suggested that “people in the past were not so much [different] in, like, their ideas, probably, but, how they looked, how they dressed, and all that. I don’t think – I mean, we’ve changed a lot, but ... not too much” (p. 87).</p> <p>When students did make connections between more general aspects of past and present, they attributed these to sources such as their family, the media, or their English class – not to Blair’s teaching.</p> <p>Connection to students’ lives: Blair’s students could discern little impact of the past on their present-day lives.</p> <p><b>Empathy: disposition to consider others’ perspectives but not in relation to the learning context</b></p> <p>The interviews revealed that students had empathy in the sense that they were disposed to look for alternative perspectives on events, but they did not do this in the context of civil rights, nor did they position themselves within those perspectives. As Ann explained, “History is just given to you. This is your history, just learn it” (p. 102). Blair’s narrative approach did not bring them to understand alternative points of view.</p>